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AMERICAN WEEKLY INDIAN

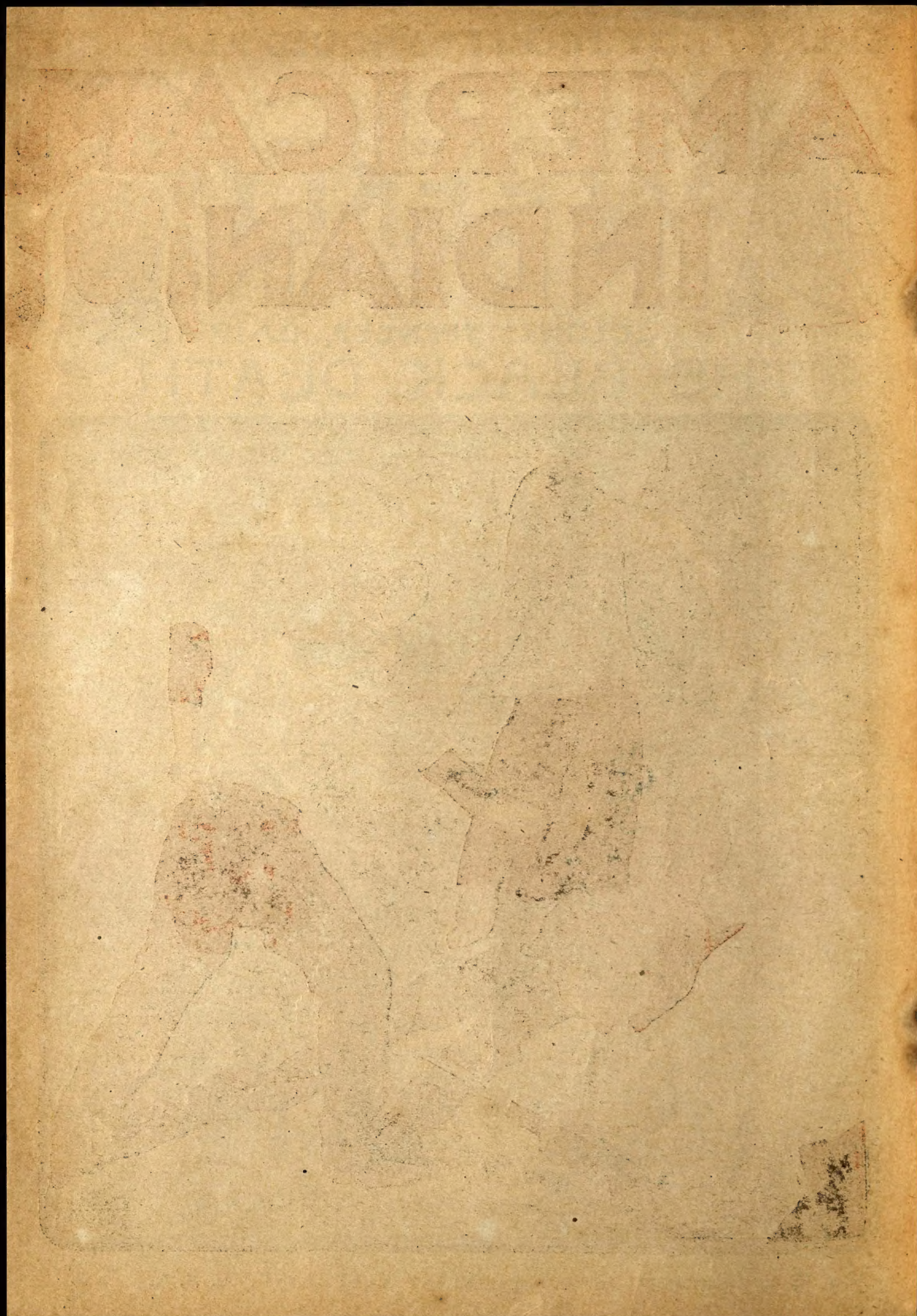
BY COLONEL SPENCER DAIR

THE BLACK DEATH

IN AWFUL FURY, THE OLD WITCH
HURLED THE CURSE OF THE BLACK DEATH



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AMERICAN WEEKLY INDIAN

BY COLONEL SPENCER DAIR

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THE BLACK DEATH

OR

The Curse of the Navajo Witch

By COL. SPENCER DAIR

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS.

JOE SANDERS—Owner of the Broken Circle ranch, against whom a Navajo witch utters her curse of the Black Death. A flood sweeps away the ranchman's home and he has difficulty in rescuing his daughter, granddaughter and son-in-law; but finally takes them to the ranch of a neighbor, whom he induces to join him in hunting the old witch, finally ending her miserable career, after passing through many dangers.

HARRIET EVANS—Daughter of Sanders.

BETH EVANS—Granddaughter of Sanders, whose powers of sensing danger saves the family from being carried away and drowned by the flood.

JOHN EVANS—Son-in-law of Sanders.

FRED BLOOMER—Owner of the Three Bar ranch, to whose house

Sanders takes his family and the man who accompanies the other on his tracking of the old witch.

MARIA BLOOMER—Wife of Fred.

SHEBEAR—Navajo witch, whose curse of the Black Death has terrified women, men and children for many years; she finally sends her message of death to Sanders, who laughs at her powers and hunts her to her death.

COYOTE—One of Bloomer's cowboys, who betrays his master's plans to Shebear, but is finally captured.

RUNNING HORSE—An Indian chieftain, whom Shebear calls to her assistance.

BLUE SKY—A half-breed guide, who is forced to serve the witch-hunters against his will.

OTHER RANCHMEN, COWBOYS and Indians.

CHAPTER I.

THE SINISTER SYMBOLS.

"Rat-a-tap-tap!"

Above the howling of the wind, this knocking sounded faintly on the door of a ranch house standing in a coulee among the foothills of New Mexico—so faintly, indeed, that the two men, woman and child inside were not sure whether the rapping was the fancy of their imaginations or not.

"Did you hear anything?" asked the woman, looking inquiringly at the elder of the two men.

But her attention was immediately distracted by the action of the child who ran to her mother and buried her head against the woman's breast, trembling violently as she cast furtive glances toward the door.

Tenderly the mother put her arms about the quivering girl.

"There, there, Beth!" she murmured, soothingly. "What makes you shake so? Nothing's going to hurt you—Momsy won't let it!"

The terror of the child, however, had a marked effect upon her elders.

"Must have been some one knocking," asserted the younger of the two men, rising and starting toward the

door. Maybe some poor devil has lost his way. It's a terrible night to be out!"

"So bad that no one with good intentions would try to travel in it," returned the other man. "Don't let Beth and Harriet get on your nerves, John. It was probably a twig of that acacia bush beating against the door. If it was anybody, they'll knock again."

Scarce had the words left the speaker's lips, however, than there came a second summons.

"Rat-a-tap-tap!"

This time there was no mistaking the sound—so distinct, so imperative were the knocks.

Together, both men sprang to their feet and, with hands reaching for their pistol-holsters, strode to the door while the woman and child cowered, shuddering, as though their finer instincts sensed some impending danger.

"You unbar the door, John, I'll be ready in case it's—"

"N-o, popsy, no-o!" wailed the little girl.

But the men paid her no heed.

Quickly removing the stout iron bar from the sockets which had enabled the door to withstand many a battering by drunken halfbreeds and greasers—for the house was in a lonely valley which made it a tempting place to attack—the younger man threw open the door while the other, six shooters in his hands, stood on one side, ready to fire at whoever should enter, if he, or they, proved suspicious.

But as the ray of light from the open door flashed out not a soul was to be seen!

In amazement, the two men stared at one another, the mother and daughter, their arms encircled, peering into the night with tense, white faces as they rocked to and fro.

"Close the door, quick!" commanded the elder man. "It's some trick!"

Instantly his companion started to obey.

Just as he moved, however, there rang out a blood-curdling cackle—and three dark objects fell at his feet!

Stooping over the younger man picked them up, disclosing three bits of black braided hair, each braid pierced by a flint arrowhead.

"The Black Death—for three of us!" gasped the elder man, as he beheld the sinister tokens.

In horror, the three adults glanced from one to another, then, with a soul-trying moan, the woman fell to the floor, her daughter beneath her, in a swoon.

Roused from their stupor of terror, the men hurriedly slammed the door, dropped the bar into place and turned to the woman and child.

With gentle hands, they lifted the former from the floor and carried her to a blanket covered bunk where they placed her, the elder man running to a cupboard for some stimulants while the younger returned to where the little girl lay, huddled in a motionless heap, on the floor.

Frantically, the man grabbed her to his breast, gazing into her blanched face, and as her skin touched his, he uttered a wild exclamation of alarm.

"Joe, she's cold! Beth's cold! You don't suppose it's struck so soon?"

"Nonsense, John! Things don't happen in that way! Have some sand! Mix some warm water and brandy in a cup and force it down Beth's throat. I always said there was nothing to this Black Death but fear and superstition and now I'll prove it!"

"It's all right for you—it isn't your daughter!" returned the other man, as he placed the child on the bunk beside her mother and with trembling hand poured some of the powerful stimulant into a cup and mixed it with warm water as he had been directed.

"But it's my daughter there on the bunk with Beth," rejoined the elder man, impressively. "Remember, John, she's doubly dear to me, because she's given me a granddaughter! So have some sense about you! How do you suppose a braid of hair and an Injun arrowhead can cause any one's death?"

"Because it's the symbol of old Shebear, the Navajo witch's curse!"

"What if it is? Haven't you ever heard of it's failing? I've seen it more than ten times!"

"But it never came to you before, did it?"

"Why-no."

"Exactly. And you remember that every one of those who received it met a violent death, don't you?"

"Why-yes. But none of them were from those braids of black hair and arrowheads. There isn't one I know who received 'em but lived for years afterwards," returned the elder man, laying an emphasis upon the words as though he found it necessary to fortify his own faith in the impotence of the sinister symbols.

"Then you see, the curse worked!"

"Buncombe! Any one living in this part of the country is liable to get shot down by some sneaking greaser or drunken Injun wherever he goes."

"That doesn't make any difference! The men who received the notice that the Black Death had been declared against them died suddenly. There's the point. *Once you're under old Shebear's curse it'll get you—it may be to-morrow or it may be years later!*"

"Well, it won't get any of us this time! Buck up and put such fool ideas out of your head! Harriet and Beth need our attention."

The younger man, however, was not to be freed from his fear of the power of the braids and arrowheads so easily and, though he assisted in administering the stimulants to the woman and child, he asked:

"Why won't it work this time—just as it did in the ten times you spoke of?"

"Because I'm going to put an end once and for all to the old witch so she can't scare any more women and children out of their wits!"

"You mean you're going on Shebear's trail?" exclaimed the other, gazing at the grizzled, stern-faced man beside him, in terror.

"Exactly!"

Unnoticed by the two men, the woman had opened her eyes and, raising herself to one elbow, had listened intently to their words. But as her father announced his determination to track the old Navajo witch to her death, she cried:

"No, Daddy, no!"

CHAPTER II.

BETH'S WARNING.

At the sound of the woman's voice, both men turned toward the bunk.

"Thank goodness! you're all right!" exclaimed the

younger man, rushing to her and clasping her in his arms. "I was af—"

But his words were interrupted by his wife.

"Where's Beth?" she asked, in her eagerness to hear what her husband and father were saying not having noticed that her child lay beside her.

"There on the bunk," returned the elder man.

Releasing herself from her husband's arms, the woman bent anxiously over the little girl.

"What makes her so white? How long has she been so?" she cried, gazing with wild eyes from one to the other of the men standing before her. And then, seized by the same idea that had rushed to her husband's mind, she gasped:

"The Black Death hasn't claimed her—h-a-s it?"

"No indeed!" responded her father with emphasis.

"Look here, Harriet, you must get all that nonsense out of your head—and the sooner the better. I've been telling John there is no such thing and now I'll tell you so. If—"

"Yes, I heard what you said, Daddy. But we'll talk about that later. Just now, Beth needs our attention. Tell me how long she has been like this! How long is it that I have been on the bunk?"

"About five minutes," answered the elder man.

"But there's nothing to get excited about, Harriet."

"You call it nothing when my baby has been white and cold for five minutes?" she cried, clutching her daughter to her breast. "Beth, dear, Beth! Open your eyes and speak to Mommy!"

So pitiful was the woman's tone that the two men, with a glance of understanding, hastened to the bunk that they might take the child from her arms.

"She'll be all right—in a few minutes," declared the elder man, striving to make his voice sound confident. "The shock of the fright has upset her and, being only a child, it takes her longer to get over it, that's all. John, just give her a bit more brandy."

Quickly the frantic father obeyed—and to the delight of the three anxious watchers, the child soon opened her eyes.

Clasping her mother tightly about the neck, Beth gazed from her father to her grandfather, then toward the door and finally to the table.

But as her eyes rested upon this last object, she shuddered and buried her head in her mother's bosom.

"Take me away, Mommy, take me away!" she moaned.

Hurriedly turning that they might see what it was that had caused the child fresh fear, they discovered the black braids with their arrowheads which lay where the younger man had thrown them on the table cloth.

With a muttered exclamation, the grandfather sprang to the table, seized the sinister symbols, walked to the stove, removed one of the covers and threw them into the fire.

But the action did not appease the child and she continued to plead that she be taken away, working herself into such a frenzy that her mother finally exclaimed:

"We must take her away, John."

"All right, we will—in the morning."

"No! No! to-night, Popsy!" begged Beth, again glancing toward the door with the same terrified look which she had before it had been opened to admit the symbols of the Black Death.

"But we can't go to-night," exclaimed her father. "It's too dark. We couldn't see where we were going, Beth. But in the morning Mommy and Granther and

I'll all go. So be a good girl, now, and go to bed with Mommy."

The child, however, refused to be soothed by this answer. Though the effect of the stimulant at last sent her to sleep, it was only for short intervals and, arousing with a start, she would glance about her, with wild, frightened eyes and renew her pleadings to be taken away at once.

Though her elders ascribed her hysteria to the combination of the stimulant and her fear, so insistent were the child's demands to be removed from the house that they could not but be impressed, casting uneasy glances and listening intently at every sound.

The family against whom the old Navajo witch had hurled the blight of her curse consisted of Joe Sanders, his daughter Harriet and his son-in-law, John Evans, with their child. Fifteen years before, Sanders and his daughter, with the assistance of Evans had driven a herd of cattle into the valley of the Joaquin river and, finding the lands fertile, had decided to build a home.

Many were the warnings of the other ranchmen when they learned of this plan, tales of the valley being used by desperadoes of all sorts, from the mail robbing Americans to renegade Indians and swarthy greasers, of violent ends that had come to other men who had tried to graze their cattle and horses on the fertile stretch and of its being haunted. But to one and all the sturdy Sanders, who believed not in ghosts or the supernatural, turned a deaf ear, declaring that a man need have nothing to fear as long as he had plenty of guns and shells and did no wrong.

And, finding it impossible to dissuade the ranchman from his purpose, they finally desisted in their efforts, though many were the prophecies of dire misfortune that would come to him and his family.

Because of the universal fear in which the valley was held Sanders was able to buy the land for almost nothing and he established the Broken Circle ranch. In due course his daughter and Evans had been married and Beth had been born to them, some seven years after they had settled in the coulee.

Thanks to the richness of the grass, Sander's herds had grown fat and always when he drove them to the railroad yards to sell, they brought the highest price of any of the cattle offered.

As the years went by and the ranchman who defied intangible superstitions prospered, many were the men who regretted that they had allowed themselves to be swayed by the tales of indefinite dangers and had purchased less fertile ranges elsewhere. But always were there some who shook their heads knowingly, declaring that Sanders would yet live to regret his rashness and defiance of all traditions.

His daughter was as fearless as himself and though Evans lacked their indifference to the many stories of danger, whenever he was afield always assumed the courage he did not possess, out of loyalty to his wife and father-in-law.

But as the three sat and watched over Beth, the warnings and tales recurred to them, though none of them mentioned the fact, and added greatly to their uneasiness caused by the persistent begging of the child to be taken away.

Toward midnight, the little girl had fallen into such an apparently sound slumber that her mother had just asked her husband to prepare the bed, when Beth awoke with a terrified wail.

"Take me away! Take me away now, Mommy! It's coming! It's coming!" she cried.

In alarm, the woman glanced from one to the other of the men.

"There, there, Beth!" she soothed. "You mustn't think that anything's coming. There's nothing going to—with Popsy and Granther and Mommy here."

But, as before, the child refused to be comforted, suddenly turning her head toward the North and listening intently.

"John! Daddy! if you love me, if you love Beth, please go out and see if there's anything around. See if the darkness hasn't let up a little, so we can start and ride over to Bloomer's ranch."

"Now don't get the nerves, Harriet," began her father.

"It isn't nerves!" insisted the mother, earnestly. "You ought to know that, seeing how I came up here with you when everyone said we'd be murdered before we'd been here a week. It's because if we don't go, I'm afraid Beth will go crazy with fear." Then, noting that her father was again about to protest, she added: "You wouldn't either of you like to think it was your obstinacy that caused any—harm—to Beth, would you?"

Before this appeal and the mute supplication in the child's eyes as it was uttered, the two men arose and, drawing their shooting irons, unbarred the door and went outside.

"Mary Ann! but what a night!" exclaimed Sanders as he strove to penetrate the inky blackness with his eyes. "Since I've been on the plains I don't believe I ever saw it darker—and I've known some dark nights! You couldn't see a tribe of Injuns if they were standing right alongside the house! I—Hark! What's that?" he suddenly exclaimed, placing his hand to his ear and leaning to the North.

A momentary lull in the howling of the wind had come, making the silence that pervaded the valley the more complete.

Intently both men listened.

In the distance, their strained ears caught a low rumble, which grew louder almost as soon as they had heard it.

"What can that be?" inquired the younger man, his voice trembling.

But even before the other could reply, the swirl of water beating against the rocks was added to the roar.

"The Swanville dam has given way! Quick, get Beth, and Harriet and what shells, food and guns you can—I'll get the horses!" gasped Sanders.

CHAPTER III.

THE HURRIED FLIGHT.

No urging did Evans need to carry out the commands of his father-in-law and fear for the lives of his loved ones lent wings to his feet as he dashed back the fifty or more feet the two men had advanced from the house.

The Swanville dam had been constructed in a natural basin among the foothills for the purpose of irrigating the lands to the East and West. When it had been completed, the engineers said that the dam was

stout enough to withstand the sudden and violent risings of the Joaquin river, a wicked little stream which threaded its way among the hills, apparently nothing more than a Providence given water course for the thousands of horses and cattle that grazed along its bottoms. But those who knew the river feared it. Too often had they seen it turn from a peaceful rivulet to a raging, turbulent torrent, tearing at its rock lined banks as though in mad endeavor to sweep them away that it might flow out onto the lowlands and devour the herds placidly feeding.

Many a time, before the dam had been built, had the members of the isolated household seen the water rise to within a foot of their door sill. But it had been years since they had received more than enough water from the overflow to keep their grass sweet and green or to afford drink for their stock.

Just as there were wisecracks who had prophesied misfortune would overtake Sanders and his family, so there were those who declared that though the dam had withstood the onslaught of the angry waters there never was stone, cement or concrete that could hold back the river's attack forever. Indeed, Evans remembered that only the day previous, he and his father-in-law had been speaking of the unusually heavy rains and the possibility of trouble being caused by them, only to dismiss the thought of danger from the quarter of the dam as needless worry.

But as the man recalled this conversation and the fulfillment of the prophecies that the strength of the dam had been overrated, he could not help wondering if it might not mark the beginning of the misfortunes which had been predicted for his family and himself for defying the ghosts of the departed Indian chieftains and braves who were supposed to haunt the valley which had been ascribed their "Happy Hunting Ground" by popular tradition.

As he ran, these ideas flashed through his mind, yet he determined not to add to the alarm of his wife and child by voicing them and, consequently, as he entered the house, he thought only of the fact that the Swanville dam was but fifteen miles above their ranch and that quick work alone could save them from a terrible death.

But in his haste, he had forgotten to banish the expression of fear from his face and as he dashed in through the door his wife noticed it.

"Oh, John! What is it—Indians?" she gasped drawing the child close to her breast.

"No. Joe and I have just decided we would get out of here—as Beth and you wish. Put down the girl and gather all the food you can while I get the guns and shells."

At a loss to know whether her husband had really yielded to her desires or was trying to conceal some pressing danger from her, the woman scanned his face searchingly.

"Come, don't sit there, staring. Get up and pack some grub. If you don't hurry, Joe may change his mind when he comes back and sees you haven't begun preparations."

Though the man tried to speak calmly, there was a suppressed excitement in his voice that did not escape his wife.

"You're not telling me the truth, John," she exclaimed, rising, nevertheless, and scurrying about to collect provisions. "There's something wrong—I know it. What is it?"

"Don't ask questions! Do as I told you! Beth, stop crying and run and help Mommy."

Such words from the usually phlegmatic man alarmed his wife more than the truth could have done.

"John Evans, you tell me what the trouble is or I won't lift my finger to do another thing!" she suddenly exclaimed, determined to end her suspense.

Realizing that every second was precious and knowing the woman too well not to understand that she would do nothing until she were apprised of the facts, the man replied, assuming as matter of fact a tone as he could:

"The Swanville dam has given way, Harriet, and we've got to ride like the wind if we're going to save ourselves!"

Fortunately, the child had gone into their bedroom to get some clothes so that she did not hear the awful news contained in the first words. But she did happen to hear what was said about riding as she returned to the living room.

"Why must we ride fast, popsy?" she demanded. "It's too dark."

"Never mind, Beth," responded her mother. "Just come here and help me put some food in this bag. There, that's it, you hold it and count the pieces I put in," she added as an after thought, determined if possible to keep the danger from the child till they were on their way, at least.

While his family in the house were making all possible speed in collecting the most important things which would be needed on their flight from the raging torrent to safety, Sanders was working frantically to get three ponies saddled.

Lighting a torch as he entered the horse corral, he found the animals terrified at the sound of the roaring waters, plunging and crashing into one another as they strove to escape from the strongly built enclosure.

Even his voice failed to calm them and it was only by resorting to his rope that he finally managed to capture three of them. But this feat did not end his difficulties.

Whinnying and leaping, the ponies struggled to free themselves and it was only after using all the tricks he knew that he was at last able to get saddles upon their backs and bits between their teeth.

Hard of muscle as he was, when the third pony had been conquered, the perspiration was running from Sander's face.

"If the flood had caught us, I don't believe I could have done it," he said to himself.

But no time did he have to speculate as to what might have happened. The roar of the waters was as continuous thunder and mingled with it were the terrified bellowings and the thud of hoofbeats as the cattle raced in mad endeavor to get away from the death-bearing flood.

And as the ranchman heard these sounds, his heart sank within him!

"We've got a double race for life!" he groaned. "We've got to outrun the cattle as well as the water!"

Quickly he vaulted onto the back of his broncho only to dismount the next moment to gather up some of the braided grass used for torches, which hung from a peg in the corral. These he hurriedly knotted about the pommel of his saddle and, once more mounting, gal-

loped toward the house, leading the plunging ponies of his daughter and son-in-law.

"Are you ready?" he called, riding close to the door without dismounting.

"Just a few minutes more, Daddy," replied the woman. "I want to get some clothes for Beth."

"Never mind about the clothes, Harriet! We'll be lucky if we are alive to wear the ones we have on to-morrow. John, bring out the grub and shell bags and tie them onto your saddle. Sling as many of the rifles as you can over your shoulders and give the rest to Harriet. I'll take Beth! Lively now! The cattle are coming!"

As they were apprised of this new danger, the husband and wife gazed at one another and then at their child in mute agony.

"Don't stand there like a couple of fools!" shouted the ranchman. "Do as I say and bring the things out here! Every second now is worth a year bye and bye!" Then, as an idea flashed through his mind, he added: "Come, Beth, come to Granther. Quick if you want to ride with him. He can't wait for you!"

As he had hoped, the child ran to the door and lifted up her hands for him to swing her up beside him, just as she had done thousands of times before when he offered to take her for a canter, for she liked to ride with him. And wasting no time, he swung her in front of him, clasping her tightly with one arm as she sat astride the saddle.

The sight of their daughter going out into the darkness had the effect upon the father and mother Sanders had hoped it would and without stopping to gather up more of their belongings, they followed, swinging easily into their saddles.

"Which way, Joe?" asked the man, starting to ride away.

"Hold on there, not so fast, John!" returned the ranchman. "Take your rope and give a couple of turns round the pommel of Harriet's saddle and mine. I can't do it, with Beth in my arms. We're more than likely to be glad we're roped together before the night's over!"

Quickly the man obeyed and when he announced that he had completed the task, Sanders gave the word to proceed.

"Did you leave the corral open, Daddy?" asked his daughter as the ponies leaped forward.

"There now, I didn't," he exclaimed.

"Then we'll ride there first, John," declared the woman. "I never should be able to sleep again if I thought that we had left those poor, dumb brutes penned up for the water to drown."

In hearty sympathy with her words, the men, who were riding one on each side of Harriet, swerved their mounts toward the corral and when they reached it, it was but the work of a minute to throw open the great gate and as they did so, the rush of the frightened animals almost swept their own ponies off their feet.

But vigorous blows from their quirts finally turned the dash of the other horses away from them.

Clapping spurs into the flanks of their mounts, the three riders leaped forward and, with shoulder rubbing against shoulder, the race for life was begun!

CHAPTER IV.

SANDERS' SACRIFICE.

So deafening was the roar of the water, the bellowing of the frenzied cattle and the pounding of their hoofs that the three riders who were racing with the flood for their lives and that of the little girl could not hear the footbeats of their own horses and were thus unable to tell whether or not they were headed in the right direction.

"Reach over to my saddle pommel, Harriet, and get one of the torch braids," commanded her father. "If we are going to make a safe getaway, we've got to see not only where we are going but how near the steers are."

Quickly the woman obeyed and, as the flame flared, each checked his pony a bit that he might see the better.

And the scene that the blazing grass disclosed was one to strike terror to the stoutest heart!

The valley at the point where Sanders had built his ranch house was some three hundred yards wide and almost through the middle ran the Joaquin river.

As Harriet held the torch above her head, moving it from side to side, the lowlands were alive with leaping, plunging steers, striving madly to outrun the death-bearing torrent behind them—and they were less than the width of the valley away from the little group of humans.

"Where do you suppose our boys are?" asked John, in a hushed voice.

"Either drowned or safe in the hills, it depends upon whether they were awake and on their jobs or asleep," returned the grizzled ranchman. "But don't worry about them, we haven't time to think of anyone else—if we're going to save ourselves."

"Harriet, swing the torch so we can see whether the way is clear ahead."

Anxiously the trio peered before them as the blazing grass threw flickering flares in front, giving grotesque and weird shapes to the rocks and bushes which lined the edges of the trail upon which they had set out.

"The way's clear—so far," exclaimed Evans. "What place do you think we'd better aim for, Joe?"

The valley below the ranch house, Southward whither they were headed, was almost a canyon, so sheer were the rocky foothills for more than three miles.

"There's only one place where we can be safe, the Injun burying ground—that is if we can reach it. Come on, we've no time to lose."

The spot selected by the ranchman was a rocky plateau extending for some thirty yards in each direction, as though the crown of a hill had been cut off and levelled down.

Before the country had been settled by white men, report had it that the chieftains of the Navajo tribes had been carried there for interment, no matter in what part of the land they had been killed or died.

Consequently it was thrice sacred ground to the Indians and even the desperadoes, cowboys and ranchmen had held it in respect.

Mindful of these facts, especially in view of the threat so recently received from the old Navajo witch, Evans

and his wife heard Sanders' designation of the spot as their haven from the flood with alarm.

"Oh, not *there*, Daddy!" protested his daughter. "If we can keep ahead of the flood for that distance, surely we can ride a bit farther to the trail to Bloomer's Three Bar ranch."

"But it isn't from the flood alone that we are fleeing, child!" returned her father. "We've more to fear from the cattle, just the few minutes necessary to get to the burying ground, than we have from the water!"

"Then let's ride faster!" exclaimed Evans. "After the signs we received to-night, if it should be learned we had taken refuge up on the plateau, we'd have the whole of old Shebear's following after us! You know that as well as I do, Joe."

"That's true enough, but at the same time, our first duty is to save Harriet and Beth. When it's a matter of life and death, I don't care what the Injuns think about it!"

"But if we *do* find when we get to the trail to the burying ground that we have time to make the road to Bloomer's, you'll let us do it, won't you, Daddy?" implored his daughter.

A more stern and stubborn man than Joe Sanders would it have taken to resist the appeal of the woman's voice and, though they had been riding during the discussion, the ranchman realized that they were jeopardizing their chances for escape by even talking.

"All right, I'll promise, Harriet—if there is time," he replied, though he added under his breath, "There's little chance of our making even the plateau."

Their objective point settled, the three riders devoted all their attention and energy to pushing their ponies to the limit of their speed.

In striking contrast to the anxiety of the men and woman was the lightheartedness of the child.

"What fun, Granther," she murmured, as they dashed over the uneven ground of the valley. "You've never taken me as fast as this before."

"And I hope I never will have to again, Beth," he returned in a voice so serious that the child turned to look up in his face, the drawn lines of which were enhanced by the flickering flare from the still burning torch which the woman held.

But the innocent movement of the little girl was to cost the man dear!

In turning so suddenly, she had almost slipped from her grandfather's arms.

Feeling her dropping, Sanders let go the reins and clutched frantically at her with his right hand, seizing her just in time to prevent her falling to the ground.

Yet he had saved his granddaughter at what threatened to be the expense of them all!

Being expert horsemen all, they were aware that when riding over rough ground, especially in the night, it not only helped their mounts but gave them confidence to be ridden on a very short rein, that their heads might be held high, thus steadying them when they made a misstep and stumbled.

Accordingly, when the ranchman loosed his reins in order to catch his granddaughter, his pony's head dropped and, missing the helping check, it stumbled.

Frantically the animal struggled to regain his footing—but his impetus was too great and he pitched forward, driving his head into the hard ground.

Sensing the misstep, even before it came, the ranchman had kicked his feet clear of his stirrups and,

straightening his legs in front of him, when the horse went down, slid over his head, clear of all danger.

Thanks to the horsemanship of Evans and his wife, they were not precipitated into the pile, however.

When the fall of Sander's pony had taughtened the rope that bound the three animals together, instinctively realizing the cause, both the man and woman leaned far to the other side, turning their horses' heads at the same time.

A terrible instant of uncertainty as to whether, or not their mounts would be able to withstand the sudden shock there was and then relief.

They had kept their ponies on their feet!

"Are you hurt? Is Beth safe?" cried the woman in agonized tones, as she leaned forward, holding the remnant of the torch, burned so short that its blaze had singed her hand, that she might discover whether her father and child were under the struggling pony, or not.

"We're safe!" returned Sanders, coming within the circle of light cast by the torch, bearing the child unharmed in his arms.

"How's your pony?" asked Evans.

"More'n I can tell you—yet. Here, John, take Beth and I'll find out."

Even as he spoke, the ranchman thrust the trembling child into her father's arms and hurried to where his horse was kicking and struggling to get to its feet.

In silence, the anxious man and woman awaited his verdict.

Patting the pony reassuringly and speaking soothingly to it, Sanders ran his fingers hurriedly over the forelegs of the animal.

"Nothing worse than a strain," he finally announced. But he did not add that the strain might prove so bad it would be impossible for the horse to make any speed with him on its back!

"Then get him to his feet! We're losing time!" returned Evans.

The ranchman's answer was in actions, not words, however.

Whipping his knife from his belt, he cut the rope that bound the saddle pommels together with a powerful stroke, then hurriedly unwound a couple of strands of the torch grass and handed them to his daughter.

"Take these, Harriet, and ride with John and Beth for all you are worth!" he commanded.

"And leave you alone?" she retorted. "Not much, Daddy! How could I ever live if I thought that I had deserted you for the sake of myself?"

"But it isn't me alone you must think of, girl," the grizzled rancher replied, a strange huskiness in his voice. "You must think of John and Beth! Your duty is to them more than it is to me! Besides, I shall be right after you—as soon as you get away and give me a chance to get my pony to his feet."

"I won't go! I won't ride a step, Daddy, unless you go with us!" declared the woman, vehemently. "If we c-can't all be saved, we won't any of us!"

As this tragedy, a tragedy which would have taxed the ethics of many a philosopher and probably caused discussions of long hours to solve the questions involved, was being enacted in the dark valley where death was close upon them, already the labored breathing of the terrified, plunging cattle could be heard above the sullen roar of the flood.

"You'll ride on, this minute—or I'll put a bullet through my head!" exclaimed the ranchman, whose

only code of ethics was to give his all for those he loved. And as he spoke, he drew his six shooter and placed its muzzle against his forehead.

"N-o-o! Not that, Daddy! We'll go!" shrieked his daughter.

"Then start! Every second you're losing now is worth hours, later! John, don't sit there like a fool! Grab Harriet's pony and *make* her go with you! I'll be all right!"

Deeply moved by the noble words and understanding the tremendous self-denial they contained—for he had a daughter of his own—Evans roused from his inactivity and, clasping Beth the tighter with his left arm, struck his wife's horse a stinging blow with his quirt, at the same time driving the rowels of his spurs into his own.

Startled and maddened, the two animals leaped forward into the darkness, leaving the grizzled old ranchman alone with his fallen pony, the frenzied herds and thundering flood at his back.

CHAPTER V.

A MAD RIDE.

For a moment, the man who had voluntarily placed his life in the greatest jeopardy that his dear ones might have at least a fighting chance for theirs stood and gazed after them—for the realization of his position only came to him in its fullest measure as he saw their forms vanish into the inky blackness of the night.

But, fortunately for him, the sudden struggle of his pony, as with thunderous roar the cattle bore down upon them, recalled him to his danger.

"I'll not give up, that is not without an effort!" the ranchman exclaimed to himself. "Come, boy, get to your feet, if you can. Let's see if you are too badly hurt to stand."

As though he understood the words, the pony raised himself on his front feet and, assisted by a pull on the bridle by Sanders, scrambled to all fours.

Hastily lighting a torch, the ranchman held it down to the horse's legs that he might see how the animal stood. Finding, to his intense delight, that the sprain was not so severe it caused the pony to hold his foot from the ground, he vaulted lightly into the saddle.

"We've got to make a hard run for it, boy," Sanders exclaimed as he gathered up his reins and leaped the animal forward. "This time I promise you I'll keep your head up."

Gamely the pony responded and though limping slightly, it tore down the trail as if trying to make up for the precious moments that had been lost.

But though it ran with the speed of a deer, the cattle were driven by fear of the roaring, swirling waters behind them, the thunder of their hoof-beats and the strident whistling as they drew breath telling all too forcefully that they were close upon the fleeing horseman.

How near they were, however, the ranchman did not know. But he determined to find out and, turning in his saddle, he held his torch high above his head.

The sight that met his gaze caused his face to pale and his breath to come in quick gasps!

Eyes wild with terror, mouths open and heads low-

ered, the leaders of the steers were less than ten yards behind him. Moreover, as, fascinated, he watched their onrush, he noticed a sudden shifting of direction from those on the sides of the herd toward the center.

Hurriedly he glanced at the wall of rock on his right in an effort to learn the cause. But seeing nothing, he turned back, discovering to his dismay that the terrific lateral pressure was forcing a few of the steers ahead of the others, and closer to him.

"It's do or die, boy!" he murmured, leaning far over his horse's neck and rising in his stirrups that he might ease the crippled animal all he could. Then, of a sudden, an idea occurred to him and, straightening, he stood up in his stirrups, drawing his arm holding the torch as far back as he was able. "Why didn't I think of it before!" he cried. "It's the light from the torch that is drawing all those poor devils toward it! I hate to do it, but I must! It's their lives or mine!"

As he spoke, the ranchman hurled the flaming braid of grass as far toward the opposite side of the valley as he could.

And like moths follow the flame, so the cattle followed the torch, swerving as suddenly and as frantically away from him as they had toward him. But though his ruse had saved his life, Sanders did not rejoice. The thought that it would bring death to hundreds of the dumb animals saddened him, for the ranchman was tender hearted and many a time had risked desperate dangers to tote in a calf from the range that he might care for it at the home ranch.

Yet all the cattle had not followed the torch.

Of a sudden, his pony swerved sharply to one side, with a snort of terror, and Sanders was just able to distinguish the dark form of a steer as it dashed by.

Then another and another followed.

Realizing that he had been overtaken by the terrified creatures and that unless he could keep in the van of the great mass his doom was sealed, the ranchman belaboured his crippled, tiring pony with his quirt, at the same time rowelling its flanks cruelly with his spurs.

But the horse, though it responded to the punishment nobly, was unequal to the task and more and more of the steers rushed by them, crowding the man and pony dangerously close to the rocky side of the valley.

To most men, so desperate a situation would have brought only hopeless despair. But Sanders had been accustomed to fight against odds all his life and as the danger became greater and greater, he grew the more determined to overcome it.

Once he thought of abandoning the animal he was riding, and, taking the torch braids from his saddle pommel, seek safety by climbing up the side of the canyon-like valley. Then his knowledge of the precipitous wall of rock came to him and he realized that it would be impossible for him to gain any spot of refuge whence he would be able to work his way to any of the neighboring ranches when daylight came, and he gave up the thought.

"We must keep on running, boy," he exclaimed to his pony, finding relief in speaking aloud to the animal. "Careful not to make a misstep, though. If we go down, the steers will make jelly out of us in no time with their hoofs!"

Up to this time, the fleeing cattle had kept clear of the horse, seeming to dodge it purposely. But just as Sanders finished speaking, one of the steers rubbed

against his leg with such force that it almost threw the pony over.

But instead of adding to his alarm, the action gave the ranchman an idea!

Hastily uncoiling his lariat and spreading the noose, Sanders leaned far from his saddle.

Of a sudden, as another steer thundered by, the ranchman dropped the noose over its horns.

With a snort of terror at the touch of the rope on its head, the creature put on a fresh burst of speed.

But Sanders had anticipated just such a move, leaning far back in his saddle, he braced his feet against the stirrups, sticking them straight out in front of him and pulled with all his strength, drawing the slack around his saddle pommel as he crept up on the fleeing steer.

Eased by this support, just as a runner is when he clings to a saddle girth or stirrup, the ranchman's pony ran faster and, to the delight of the man on his back, was soon on even terms with the steer.

"Saved!" ejaculated Sanders, a tone of thankfulness in his voice. "Five minutes more of this and we'll be at the trail to the burying ground!"

Yet even as he expressed his gratitude at his own rescue, a fresh cause of alarm suggested itself to the horseman—he feared that he might crash into his daughter and son-in-law and upset them, unable, as he was to distinguish objects ahead partly because of the darkness and partly because of the terrific speed at which he was travelling.

Fortunately, however, the danger was not one that he was unable to alleviate and, hurriedly seizing another piece of grass braid, he lighted it, raising it high above his head that he might illuminate with its flare as great a distance ahead of him as possible.

A moment after he had done so, he was again conscious from the sound behind him that the cattle were, for a second time, shaping their course for the light, but, trusting to the aid of the beast to which he had lashed himself to keep him clear of the others, he gave them no more heed, anxious only to prevent a collision with the members of his family who were riding before him.

But suddenly, as his eyes chanced to rest for a moment on the trail in front of him, the ranchman gave an exclamation of horror!

As though in gloating exultation, the grey, muddy water of the Joaquin was curling and leaping as it swept down the valley.

"The cattle have made such a noise I couldn't hear the flood!" groaned Sanders. Then he glanced at the rocks beside him, searching for some landmark that might tell him how near he was to his goal, and as he beheld a crag, jutting sentinel like into the air, he exclaimed: "Hooray. The trail to the burying ground!"

Yet even as the ranchman took heart in the thought that he had escaped from the double death of the steers and flood behind him, his rejoicing was cut short!

Raising his torch that he might make sure he had not been mistaken in the landmark to the burying ground, his eyes caught sight of the two horses and the forms of his daughter and son-in-law racing down the valley.

"Fools! Fools! They're riding for the pass to Bloomer's! Why couldn't they have seized the safety which the plateau afforded them instead of prolonging the danger for another two miles?"

But never did it occur to the ranchman to make sure

of his own safety by turning in at the trail to the burying ground.

Rising in his stirrups, swinging his torch and yelling at the top of his lungs, Sanders bore down on the man and woman in front of him.

Purposely making his voice shrill in the hopes that it would carry above the rumble of the steers and flood, the ranchman watched to learn whether or not the others heard it.

After a few anxious moments, he saw Harriet turn, and knew that they could see him.

But with this knowledge came the realization of a new danger!

Sanders was powerless to guide the steer which was affording him such great assistance and there was imminent danger that the animal would dash into the horseback riders. True, he could sever the rope that lashed him to the creature yet, if he did, he realized that he could never hope to keep up with the other two on his crippled pony. But while he was hesitating what to do, his daughter solved the problem for him.

Relighting her torch, she waved it in a signal for him to come on, while at the same time he saw her crowd her own and Evans' ponies to one side.

Like a flash he was upon them.

"Hook a steer! Hook a steer—like me!" he shouted as he rushed past.

For an instant, Sanders beheld a look of blank amazement on the faces of the man and woman as they strove to catch the meaning of his words, then, as they caught sight of the method by which the grizzled ranchman was able to travel at such speed, a look of understanding supplanted it and, turning in his saddle, he saw his daughter uncoil her rope, pass it quickly around the pommel of her husband's saddle and then peer on both sides of her for some steer over whose head she could drop the noose.

Yet before he could see whether or not she had succeeded, Sanders was swept around a bend in the valley.

But had he been able to keep them in view a few moments longer, he would have seen the woman suddenly give a deft twist to her rope which caused it to settle full over the horns of a big steer.

So exciting were these incidents, that none of the fugitives had noticed, that the flood was above the knees of their ponies and it was not until their mounts began to splash water over them that they realized it.

On, on the strange group of humans, horses and steers raced, their speed growing less and less as the angry waters grew higher and higher.

Just as he felt the chill of the water over his knees, the ranchman caught sight of the trail which would carry them to the Three Bar ranch.

Shouting encouragement to the others, Sanders cut the rope that bound him to the steer, turned his pony's head into the pass and, when he was safe above the swirling flood, drew rein, holding his torch aloft as a beacon to the man and woman.

his wife had lashed themselves came nigh to being their death!

Crazed and terrified by the constantly rising waters which surged against its sides, the other beast had lost its head and instead of following the trail down the valley, it suddenly swerved and started in the direction of the river.

For a few moments, neither the man nor his wife noticed that their course had been changed. Then, suddenly, as a leap of their ponies brought the water up to their shoulders, Harriet exclaimed:

"We must be off the trail, John!"

"What makes you think so?" demanded her husband.

"Because there's no place where the water should come as high on us as this. A minute ago, it was not up to our stirrups—now it's almost up to our necks!"

While they were speaking, the man and woman were intently peering ahead of them, scanning the turbulent surface of the water for some landmark but seeing only plunging, struggling cattle in the glare from their torch.

"We must cut loose!" announced Harriet.

"But we'll never be able to work our way alone in this flood!" protested the man. "It's our only hope to follow the steer. He knows where it is safest!"

Ere the woman could reply, however, Beth cried:

"Look, Momsy, look! There's Granther over to the left! See his torch?"

Instantly, both the child's parents gazed in the direction indicated and beheld the form of the ranchman sitting on his horse, frantically waving his braid of burning grass.

"What did I tell you?" demanded the woman. "We're off the trail—and we can't get back!"

"The Black Death was for three—and there are just three of us!"

And as the man and woman contemplated this awful thought, they sat their ponies inactive—apparently accepting their terrible fate of being drowned in the flood as inevitable.

But as it was the child who had saved them from being drowned in the ranchhouse, so it was she who inspired them with hope and galvanized them into action.

"See! See!" she cried, "We're almost opposite Granther. If we could only turn, we could reach him. He's getting off his horse and coming to us." And then turning in her father's arms, she held out her own to the man safe in the pass, crying at the top of her voice: "Take me, Granther, take me!"

Though his dear ones were too far out in the valley for the flare from his torch to bring them within his range of vision, Sanders had, nevertheless, divined just what had occurred and in an attempt to give them aid, he had dismounted, hastily uncoiling what remained of his lariat and a couple of grass braids from the pommel of his dripping saddle. With these clutched firmly in one hand, he held the torch aloft in his other while he crept out on a rock that jutted over the entrance to the pass.

The confidence in her grandfather to rescue her when her own parents sat motionless stung them deeply, rousing them to action as nothing else could.

"Granther can't hear you, Beth, but Momsy and Popsy will save you!" exclaimed her mother.

CHAPTER VI.

A DESPERATE ALTERNATIVE.

Though the grizzled ranchman had been borne to safety by the aid of a steer, the one to which Evans and

And as she spoke, the woman brought her knife down upon the taut rope, severing it instantly.

Released from their stay, for a moment the ponies plunged helplessly then found their feet and guided by the reins of the riders on their back, struggled to reach the spot whence the encouraging light gleamed.

Urged on by quirt and spur, gamely the animals plunged ahead, slipping and scrambling as they strove to find a sound footing against the terrific force of the waters which, as though angry at being baffled by their victims, surged and splashed over them.

But the grim determination of despair was in the hearts of the man and woman and they forced the ponies ahead, jabbing them without mercy.

At first, it seemed to them that they made no headway—then all at once, the horses struck surer footing where the water was shallower and they gained the edge of the rocks lining the valley.

To their dismay, however, they found that they were fully twenty yards below the spot where Sanders stood with his torch.

But though their ponies had been able to withstand the force of the flood when they had gained the shallower water on the edge of the valley they were almost powerless to make their way back toward the light because of the rush of the steers, which, finding that the flood was less deep along the wall of rocks, had as though with one accord, changed their direction that they might take advantage of the fact.

By swinging their quirts, Evans and his wife had been able to beat aside the van of the horde. But each moment brought greater numbers of the frenzied animals and before the irresistible mass, they were gradually being swept back, losing all the headway they had gained.

"It's no use!" wailed the woman. "Nothing can stand against such a living avalanche! Be merciful John, and put a bullet into Beth and me!"

"Are you crazy?" gasped her husband. "Do you want to make me a murderer?"

"But it would be a mercy, John!" pleaded his wife. "Haden't you rather know that Beth and I were out of our misery than to think that we were slowly being ground to death beneath the hoofs of these cattle?"

That death for the three of them was inevitable, the man did not doubt, and he reasoned that after shooting his wife and daughter he could send another bullet crashing into his own brain.

As at the time when he had ridden on and left Sanders behind, the higher questions involved did not trouble him. He realized only that by complying with his wife's request he would be sparing her and his child from a death of awful agony.

Ere he acted, however, he cast a despairing glance toward where he had seen his father-in-law standing.

But to his dismay, he could see no torch!

"Are you sure you want me to do it?" he finally asked, turning toward his wife, his voice disclosing the agony of his soul.

"Yes! It is the kindest thing!" returned the woman, her voice tense and low.

"Then pray for me!" gasped the soul-wracked man.

And shifting his daughter in his arms, he reached for his revolver.

But just as he was drawing the gun from its holster, Beth uttered a cry of joy!

"Oh, Granther! Take me! Take me!" she screamed,

holding out her hands toward the wall of rock above them.

At the same instant there rang out in stentorian tones the shout:

"John Evans, drop that gun back into its holster and take this rope!"

CHAPTER VII.

SANDERS DECLARES HIS INTENTION TO RETURN TO THE BROKEN CIRCLE.

Raising their faces at the cry, the man and woman who, a moment before had been preparing for death, beheld the tense features of the grizzled ranchman as, prone on his stomach, a torch in one hand, he lowered his rope directly over their heads with the other.

Having seen the riders struggle desperately toward the shore, from his lookout on the crag, Sanders had rushed along the face of the rocks as rapidly as he could until he came abreast of them.

Then, in his efforts to wind one end of the lariat around a jutting rock, he had dropped his torch.

Quickly he had lighted another and its blaze revealed the terrible purpose of his son-in-law just in time for him to prevent the double murder and suicide.

The reaction from the few tense moments which she thought were to be her last proved too much for the woman and she began to sway in her saddle.

"Steady, Harriet, steady!" shouted her father. "This is no time for fainting! Wait, at least until we have you clear of the flood!"

Such scorn was there in the ranchman's voice that it stung the woman deeply—producing the desired effect of preventing her from going into a swoon, and she grabbed with firm hold the pommel of her saddle.

Waiting only to see that his daughter had recovered her self-control, Sanders once more turned his attention to the rope which Evans had already placed over the head and arms of the little girl.

"Are you ready?" called the ranchman.

"Pull away—and be quick!" returned the man.

Rapidly Sanders hauled up his granddaughter, lifting her to where a shelf of rock projected itself conveniently above his head.

"Now sit there, Beth, and hold the torch. Don't move! Don't even speak! You might fall off and then we wouldn't be able to get your mother and father up here with us."

With an understanding far beyond her years, the child sat quiet, her pale little face peering anxiously over the edge of the rock that she might watch the work of rescuing her parents.

"Haden't I better come next, to help you pull Harriet up?" asked Evans as he again seized the precious raw-hide rope in his hands.

On the point of his tongue did the ranchman have it to give his consent to the plan, for his daughter was no light weight and the footing was so uncertain that he had difficulty in finding a spot where he would be able to brace himself sufficiently to draw her up, when he saw her again sway in the saddle.

"Quick! Grab Harriet!" he shouted to the man. "She's swooning! And if she once falls into that flood, we'll never be able to get her out!"

Obediently Evans whirled in his saddle—and just in time!

Even as he turned, the woman clutched convulsively for her saddle pommel, then, her hands seeming nerveless and unable to grasp it, she pitched sideways.

But Fate was kind and the side toward which she fell was the one where her husband was stretching out his hands to steady her—and into his strong protecting arms she fell!

Summoning all his strength, Evans swung his wife onto the neck of his pony and with trembling fingers slipped the noose of the lariat under her arms.

"Haul in, Joe!" he called, at the same time rising in his stirrups and doing what he could to lessen the weight so that the ranchman might reach her with his hands as soon as possible.

But Sanders proved equal to the emergency and in a few minutes the woman was lying safe at his feet, though unconscious.

Never waiting to remove the noose, Sanders threw the rope from about the rock with a deft twist of his wrist and lowered the end he had been holding to the horseman who was struggling desperately to hold his horse up against the onrush of the flood.

Without difficulty he caught the rope and, by dint of digging his boots into the rocks where he occasionally found a toehold, he was soon beside the others on the narrow ledge.

"Too bad we couldn't have saved the ponies," Evans exclaimed when he had recovered his breath, after an interval of several minutes. Then, as an idea flashed into his mind, he cried: "We must! All our food and shells are on their backs!"

And as he spoke, the man rose to his feet seizing the torch and making as though he would follow along the ledge in an effort to gain a spot opposite the animals.

With a frantic clutch, the ranchman grabbed the tail of his canvas hunting coat and dragged him back.

"Don't be a fool, John!" he gasped. "It's too bad we can't save the horses and grub. But we were mighty lucky to save ourselves. We don't know how far this ledge extends and the first thing you know, you'll step off into that flood—and that'll be the end of you!"

Realizing, even could he have torn himself loose from the vicelike grip of the ranchman, that the words were only too true, Evans gave up his attempt to rescue the ponies, food and ammunition and sank down beside his wife.

"What's to be done now?" he inquired after waiting in vain for the elder man to express an opinion upon their course of action.

"Bring Harriet to and then work our way back to the trail to Bloomer's," returned the ranchman.

"But we can't go on with only one horse among the three of us!"

"Sure we can. Harriet can take Beth with her and you and I can walk."

This plan meeting with Evans' approval, they quickly set about restoring the woman to consciousness for the second time that night and, when this had been accomplished, cautiously and slowly picked their way back to the trail and the waiting pony.

The path to the Three Bars ranch led for several rods through a defile in the rocky foothill, then crossed the top and descended into the valley on the other side, Bloomer's house being at the base of the mountain right close to the trail.

Too overcome with their exertions and the shock of the scenes through which they had passed to speak, the little band climbed the rough path in silence. But as they gained the top of the hill, each, as with one accord, turned toward the spot where the home from which they had been routed so suddenly stood.

In amazement, they beheld the faint glimmer of the light where they had left it burning in their living room.

Yet even as they gazed at it, too overwhelmed with their emotions even to utter exclamations of surprise, the light sputtered once or twice and went out!

"That's the last of the Broken Circle!" ejaculated Evans in a hushed voice.

"The last till we get through with old Shebear!" retorted Sanders, grimly.

This response filled Evans and his wife with dismay, for they had hoped when the ranchman selected another site for his range he would locate in some other part of the country.

"Surely you don't intend to come back here to live, Daddy?" exclaimed his daughter.

"That's just what I do, Harriet."

"Oh, Daddy. Not after to-night," pleaded the woman. "I should never feel safe again with the—if they rebuild the dam," she hastily added, changing her original idea as she caught the look of fierce defiance that shone in the ranchman's eyes.

"They won't rebuild, don't worry about that, Harriet," returned her father, "at least, not at Swanville. If the Joaquin was able to break the dam once it will be again and the men who put up the money won't feel like doing so, indefinitely. And you needn't have any fear of the Black Death because when I get through, the cause of that fool superstition will be removed!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PACT.

Of necessity compelled to proceed slowly because only two of them were mounted and the darkness still hung with inky blackness over the land, the little band, whose escape from destruction by the flood and steers had been fraught with such dangers, toiled patiently up the trail, crossed the top of the foothill and then descended on the other side, arriving at the Three Bar ranch in due course.

As the weary fugitives entered the yard of the home ranch, all was quiet and peaceful, in striking contrast to the death and destruction Sanders and his family had left behind them, on the other side of the foothills.

So impressive was the serenity enveloping the region that Harriet exclaimed:

"There, you see, Daddy, how much quieter things are in this section than back at the Broken Circle!"

"It's just your imagination, daughter," replied the grizzled ranchman. "There's no more peaceful nor beautiful spot than the Joaquin valley where the home ranch of the Broken Circle stood—and there'll be no safer by the time I am ready to go back!"

This reiteration of his determination not to be driven from his range either by the fear of the witch's curse or by the elements of nature caused the woman to regret that she had brought the subject up and she was

striving to think of something to say that would dissuade her stern old father from his purpose when he drew rein and rapped loudly on the door of the ranch-house.

No response, however, did his summons receive.

"They must sleep soundly—over here," exclaimed Evans.

"If they are at home," supplemented his wife, "You don't suppose they have gone away do you, Daddy?"

"No—but we'll find out." And as he spoke, the ranchman beat a ratatattoo on the door that would have roused a deaf person.

Anxiously the fugitives awaited the result of this knocking for they were beginning to feel cold and stiff and the thought of being compelled to shift for themselves in the hay of one of the corrals did not appeal to them.

But just as they were beginning to fear that the Bloomers were away after all, they heard a shutter open and a voice call:

"Who's there?"

"Me, Joe Sanders," replied the ranchman.

Immediately there was the sound of scuffling feet, then a light gleamed, followed the next minute by the door of the ranch house being thrown open.

"What on earth brings you here at this time of night, Joe?" demanded the owner of the Three Bar, appearing in the doorway with a lamp held over his head.

But as the man beheld the other members of Sanders' party and noted their bedraggled condition, he cried out, in amazement:

"What has happened, Joe?" And then, manlike, without waiting for an explanation, he turned and called to his wife: "Hey, Maria, get up and start the fire. Here's the whole Broken Circle outfit—and they look all petered out. Come right in, Joe and the rest of you. I'll have one of my boys attend to your pony."

"Oh, he'll be all right for a time," returned Sanders. "The poor brute is so tuckered out there's no danger of his running off."

During this interchange of questions and remarks, Evans had lifted first Beth and then her mother from the back of the weary broncho and together they started for the welcome shelter of the house.

"Well, of all things! What in the name of goodness have you-all been up to?" demanded Mrs. Bloomer who, by this time, had appeared upon the scene in answer to her husband's request. "You look as though you'd been swimming the Joaquin."

"That's just what we have been doing," returned Sanders. "The dam up at Swanville broke."

Too well did the owner of the Three Bar and his wife understand the meaning of this announcement to need to ask questions about the dangers through which their friends had passed and, while the woman set about building a fire in the stove that she might give them some warm food, her husband hurried to a cupboard whence he brought out a bottle of brandy from which he quickly poured three glasses and offered them to the chilled group.

Gladly drinking them, the fugitives began to remove their wet garments, Sanders talking the while and narrating the awful experiences through which they had passed, beginning with the receipt of the three bits of braided hair.

In amazement, Bloomer and his wife listened, now

and then exchanging significant glances as the story of the escape from the flood was unfolded.

"It doesn't do any good, of course, to say so now, but I always said no good would ever come of your living in that valley, Joe Sanders," exclaimed the woman, when the recital was finished. "Though I suppose I shouldn't say it, I do believe the breaking of the dam and the loss of your ranch house and steers is a sort of punishment for your defying all traditions and warnings and living in that place which is only fit for Injuns."

"Nonsense, Maria," retorted her husband before Sanders could reply. "It isn't anything that Joe's done that caused the dam to give way. Why, it was only day before yesterday that I was over to Swanville and some engineers had just completed an examination of the thing and declared that there wasn't a better dam in New Mexico. Of course, old Shebear's threat is a different matter. But I can't see as how that had anything to do with it, either."

"You don't, eh?" rejoined his wife. "I'd like to know if the breaking of the dam on the very night the black braids was delivered isn't about as convincing evidence that Shebear's curse is working as anything could be."

"Now don't go getting Harriet and Beth all stirred up, Maria," cautioned the owner of the Three Bar. "They've been through enough to-night without your scaring them to death about those warnings. Take 'em into your room, get 'em some dry clothes and let 'em go to bed. Come on, Joe, I'll find a place for you and John."

"Much obliged, Fred. You can fix up a bunk for the woman and girl—and thank you. But sleep isn't what John and I are after. We want a couple of your best ponies."

This response filled its hearers with amazement and they lost no time in seeking the ranchman's purpose.

"I want to round up a bunch of men to go after Shebear," he announced, grimly. "I don't propose to let any dried up old hag of an Injun scare the life out of my women folks with any Black Death warnings! I'm going to show the fool people in this part of the country that trembles and moans every time Shebear or the Black Death is mentioned that the only reason she's been able to get away with this curse business of hers is because nobody has had the sand to get up and go after her!"

If Sander's request for ponies had caused the other surprise, the bold defiance of tradition and superstition indicated by his avowal startled them.

In horror, Mrs. Bloomer gazed at the owner of the Broken Circle.

"Well, of course, I haven't any control over your actions, Joe Sanders," she exclaimed, "but I tell you one thing, right now—if you think you're going to get Fred Bloomer to go along with you, you're mistaken! You can fool with old Shebear and her curses all you want to—though I don't see how Harriet lets you—but you can't mix my man up in it—no, nor any of the Three Bar outfit!"

So vehement was the manner of the woman that the grizzled ranchman who had declared his purpose of hunting the old witch to her doom glanced at Bloomer to see if he were likely to defy his wife.

Interpreting the look correctly and giving a reassuring nod, the owner of the Three Bar exclaimed:

"Take Harriet and Beth to bed, Maria, and see that

they have everything they need. Joe and John and I want to talk things over without being interrupted every other word by anyone who doesn't understand how serious matters are. Now run along. Come on, Joe, we'll go out and put your pony in the corral. By the time we get back, I reckon we'll be able to decide what's best to do, without interference."

Thoroughly familiar with all her husband's moods, Mrs. Bloomer realized from the tone of his voice and the expression on his face that anything she might say would only make her man more determined than ever to accompany Sanders on his mission of revenge and she wisely refrained from speaking, contenting herself with a significant shake of her head as she invited Harriet and Beth to accompany her to her room.

As the woman arose, the men also got up and went outdoors to care for the pony which had served the sorely pressed fugitives so nobly.

"You really mean that you're going to round up old Shebear?" asked Bloomer as soon as the door was shut behind them.

"Surest thing you know. I've always said I'd join in a hunt for the old hag. But now that she's singled out my family as marks for her deviltry, I'm going to lead the search! It's high time she was put out of the way, Fred, so she can't scare any more women and men!"

"That's true—but the old devil has such a reputation for mysterious powers that I'm afraid you'll have a hard time rounding up enough men to carry out your plan. Seems to me the best thing to do is to lay low and wait your chance to put a bullet into the hag."

"And let Harriet and Beth fret and worry themselves sick in the meanwhile?" snapped the grizzled ranchman. "Suppose it was your family, Fred. Would you want to sit round and twiddle your thumbs when you knew Maria was eating her heart out with fear of the old witch? And she's just as likely to send you one of her braids and arrows as not. You must remember that families she hasn't attacked are getting mighty scarce round this region."

For several minutes, the owner of the Three Bar ranch contemplated the words of his friend in silence.

"I reckon you're right, Joe!" he finally remarked. "But the trouble will be to get enough men together to carry the thing through. You know every man or woman against whom Shebear has uttered her curse has met violent death."

"That's just what I told Joe, back at the ranch before the dam broke," declared Evans.

"And I say what I said then—it's coincidence," retorted Sanders. "Everybody has got to die and there's never a day when a man or woman rides out around this part of the country that he doesn't run the chance of being killed before he gets back. I say Shebear's curses had no more to do with those deaths than I did."

"That's all well enough to say, Joe," returned Bloomer. "But knowing the people's feeling toward the old devil, you've got to do more than express your opinion—you've got to prove it!"

"And that's just what I'm going to do by putting an end to her miserable life. The question is, will you join me, or won't you?"

Being a man of wealth and extensive possessions both in land and cattle, the actions of the owner of the Three Bar ranch always carried great weight with the other ranchmen and Sanders knew full well that could he enlist Bloomer's aid, he would have little difficulty

in collecting a formidable posse to trail the old witch to her death.

Accordingly it was with keen anxiety he awaited his friend's reply, which increased as the moments went by without his speaking.

"How do you propose to locate her?" the owner of the Three Bar finally asked. "You know the Injuns always keep mighty mum about where she hangs out."

"Get ahold of some halfbreed and tell him I want to go to her to see if I can't buy off her curse," returned the man who had received the symbols of the Black Death.

"Great head, old man!" ejaculated Bloomer. "I never thought of that way. It ought to land her. Yes. I'll go with you!"

"Then put her there!" exclaimed Sanders, extending his right hand.

Readily the owner of the Three Bar ranch took it.

"It will mean danger and lots of it, Fred," declared the grizzled ranchman, as he clasped the hand of his friend.

"I know that, Joe."

"But you'll stay with me?"

"If we have to follow the old hag to hell!"

A moment, the two men stood, hands clasped, and looked into each other's eyes, then satisfied with what they read there, they turned and went toward the horse corral.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RANCHMAN'S PLANS ARE OVERHEARD.

Only a few minutes did it take for the ranchman to place Sander's tired pony in the corral, cut out two others, saddle and bridle them and start back toward the house.

But before they had left the pony yard, Evans exclaimed:

"Where do I come in on this hunt, Joe? When you and Fred were making your pact to hunt old Shebear to her death, you didn't pay any more attention to me than as if I hadn't been within a hundred miles of here—and I don't think it's treating me right. One of those pieces of braid and arrow may have been for me just as much as for you. It will look as though I was afraid if you don't take me with you."

"Never mind how it looks, John," returned his father-in-law. "I left you out purposely. You must stay here and take care of Harriet and Beth."

"You mean I can't go on the trail with you?" queried the man, unwilling to believe his ears.

"Just so."

"But what will people say?"

"I can't help that. Your duty is with your wife and child. They'll need you, John. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Harriet was sent into a fever because of the fright and exposure to which she has been subjected to-night. In that case, you'll be needed to care for her. Maria can't do it all and it might have a serious effect upon Harriet if she should wake up and find you had gone and left her."

"But I don't like to shirk my part of the work in hunting Shebear. You know as well as I do that the men on the range think I'm—well they don't think I

have quite as much nerve as I ought to because I don't enter into all their foolhardy amusements where they needlessly risk life and limb. But I'm not a coward—and I want to show them I'm not."

"Tut, tut, man," ejaculated Bloomer. "It sometimes requires more will power to stay at home than to go off on a posse. As Joe says, your duty is here with Harriet and Beth. Besides, if you are here, I shall feel more easy. I don't like to go away and leave Maria without any one to protect her in case the boys run amuck."

"If you're going to leave someone here, why can't it be the foreman of the boys instead of me?" persisted Evans.

"Because something may turn up that will require more mature judgment than a cowpuncher can give," interposed Sanders.

And though he uttered the words merely for the purpose of easing his son-in-law's mind, he was destined to be reminded of them very forcibly later!

The answer, however, failed to appease the man and he renewed his protests against what he called unfair treatment. But his words had no effect upon the ranchmen and he was forced to leave the corral as he had entered it—on foot.

"Tell Maria that I've gone with Joe," said the owner of the Three Bar ranch, as they reached the door of the house. "If she wants to know where, just say to round up some of the other ranchers and that we'll be back before sundown. Good luck and watch Harriet carefully."

And without giving the disappointed man the opportunity to protest further against being compelled to remain behind, the two ranchmen shook out their ponies and galloped away.

Riding at top speed until they had put the base of one of the foothills between them and the ranch-house, for both men knew the nature of Mrs. Bloomer and feared she might set out after them should she see them, when they had safely passed the jutting mountain, they slackened their pace, that they might formulate a plan of procedure.

"How many men do you think we ought to have, Joe?" asked Bloomer, "twenty or thirty?"

"No, indeed. Fifteen at the most will be a plenty."

"But there's safety in numbers, you know."

"That's not so true as it might be, Fred. In an expedition like this, there's also danger in numbers."

"How do you mean?" demanded the man, to whom the suggestion that a few men would be of more service than many was surprising.

"It's this way. If we have a lot of men, they're more likely to be seen. My idea is to make this a still hunt—if we can. I want to strike so quickly that the whole thing will be over before most people know we have started. The Injuns all swear by Shebear. If it gets out that we are on her trail, as it's bound to do if we take a lot of men along, some halfbreed cowpuncher will pass the word along of what we are up to and not only will the old witch hike for some other place but we'll find a whole bunch of bucks on our tracks. Consequently, it's my idea we shall be able to do better with not more than ten men upon whom we can place absolute reliance."

"Reckon you're right," assented Bloomer, after considering the matter for several minutes. "Such being the case, why wouldn't it be best not to take any cowboys along at all, just a few of the men we know?"

"It would. There isn't a 'puncher' within fifty miles that hasn't got Injun blood in his veins and, as I said, they are all afraid of Shebear, so afraid they worship her."

This point being settled, the two horsemen discussed the various ranchers who lived within a radius of thirty miles and finally decided upon Ned Billings, of the Criss Cross ranch; Sam Andrews, of the Tripod; Ben Moulton, of the Anchor; Jim Henry, of the Single Star; Harry Glover, of the Three Moons; Tom Hunt, of the Bow and Arrow; Al Howe, of the Half Moon; Peter Judson, of the Square and Cross and Bob Henderson, of the Running Dog.

The Bow and Arrow ranch being the nearest, the horsemen turned their ponies in its direction and in due course arrived.

To their gratification, Hunt was at home.

Apprised of his visitors' purpose, he readily consented to join them saying that he would be at the Three Bar before nightfall.

One after another, the ranches selected by Sanders and Bloomer were visited and in only one instance were they unable to enlist the aid of the owner and that was at the Three Moons where they found that Glover was away.

Upon one and all they had enjoined the strictest secrecy as to their purpose, suggesting that the men tell their wives they were going out on a hunting expedition—that being the truth but not the whole truth.

Having made frequent changes of ponies, the two leaders of the avenging party had been able to make good time and sunset saw them back at the rendezvous where they found Andrews, Moulton and Howe awaiting them. And in the course of an hour, all the others rode in.

Thanks to Evans, his wife and Mrs. Bloomer had become reconciled to the thought of the expedition and to the relief of the two leaders, they offered no objections, busying themselves with preparing food for the members of the posse and making bandages for use in case of emergency.

While they were waiting for supper to be ready, the ranchmen looked to their pistols, rifles and shells, carefully examining each one of the latter for, being experienced, they realized that a defective shell might cost the man in whose weapon it was his life.

But aside from these grim preparations, not a word was spoken as to their purpose and they laughed and joked as unconcerned as though they were not setting out upon the most dangerous mission they could undertake, the running down of an Indian witch, whose body was sacred to all the braves and squaws in the land and whose powers were feared by redskin, halfbreed, greaser and white man alike.

That Sanders was fully aware of the risk he was taking, however, was evidenced by the furtive and affectionate glances which he bestowed from time to time upon his daughter and granddaughter.

Chancing to surprise him in one of these looks, Harriet divined the cause and, under pretext of getting him to help her, called her father from the room.

"Daddy, why won't you give up this hunt for Shebear?" she pleaded, putting her arms lovingly about his neck.

"Because it's necessary for the safety of you and Beth and the rest of us," he replied, gently but firmly.

"But we could sell the Broken Circle and move to some other part of the country. The Black Death

wouldn't reach us there. *Please, Daddy. I don't like to think of your running such danger as you will when we could avoid it by going somewhere else to live.*"

"It isn't ourselves alone of whom we must think, Harriet," returned the grizzled ranchman, quietly. "The fear of Shebear has pervaded all the country round about. For the peace of mind of our women, it is necessary that we put an end to it once and for all. So don't say anything more about it, please. It only makes it harder for me. There's practically nothing to be afraid of. No one knows our purpose save you, John and Mrs. Bloomer. We shall strike quickly and silently—and be back almost before you realize we have gone!"

Seeing that it was useless to waste more time in trying to dissuade her father from the expedition, the woman gave up the attempt and, after giving him a loving embrace and a kiss, she returned to the others.

But though Sanders was confident the mission of the avenging party was secret, it was ordained he should learn to his sorrow that he had been mistaken!

When supper had been finished, the ranchmen went out to the horse corral to select the ponies to carry them and to see that all the straps and buckles of their accoutrements were in proper condition.

This done, they held a council of war as to the most likely place to find the old witch whose death-threatening messages inspired so great terror.

Various were the opinions expressed but it was finally decided they should ride to the home of an old halfbreed hunter, called Blue Sky, and under the plea that they wished him to serve as guide while they hunted grizzly bear, get him to accompany them and later force him, on the pain of death, to lead them to the cave in which report had it that Shebear lived.

But while they were discussing these matters, the ranchman did not see a form crouched low outside the corral, listening intently to their every word!

Had they done so, many things which later befell them would have been prevented!

Never even suspecting, however, that their plans had been overheard, the ranchmen went back to the house to get the food, shells and guns.

"Who's going to be in charge of the Three Bar while you are away, Fred?" asked Mrs. Bloomer, just as the men were preparing to leave.

"Why, John, of course."

"Then hadn't you better tell the boys?" his wife returned. "You know Coyote only came in to-night and he is apt to get up on his high horse."

"Have you got that ornery halfbreed on the Three Bar?" demanded Judson, in surprise. "If you'll take my advice, you'll give him his walking papers before you start out. The only safe place for him is dangling from the end of a rope from the limb of a tree!"

"Oh, I know all about him," rejoined Bloomer. "All he needs is the proper kind of handling—and there isn't a better cowpuncher ever straddled a pony. Still, it surely won't do any harm for you to keep your eye on him, John. And I reckon I'll call him in and introduce him to you," he added.

Suiting his action to his words, the owner of the Three Bar went to the door and called to Coyote.

But the cowpuncher did not respond.

Several times the ranchman shouted for him but without result.

Surprised, he was just on the point of walking round to the bunkhouse, which was about fifty feet to the

South of the home house, when one of his men called out:

"Coyote isn't here! He came in about five minutes ago, got his guns and went out!"

CHAPTER X.

SHEBEAR'S WARNING.

Surprised, but never for an instant attributing any connection between the disappearance of the halfbreed cowpuncher and the departure of the band of avengers, Bloomer called out:

"Hey, Sancho, come here a moment!" And as the cowboy came up, his master continued: "You know John Evans, don't you?"

"Sure thing."

"I thought so. Of course, you've heard that the Broken Circle home ranch was washed out last night?"

"Uhuh."

"Well, this flood killing so many cattle will probably bring out a lot of grizzlies and we're going over to the Joaquin valley to see if we can't bag a few. On account of Mrs. Evans having been upset by the events of last night, John won't go with us and while I'm gone, he will be in charge of the Three Bar outfit, understand?"

"Sure thing," returned the cowpuncher with a grin, for Evans was noted as an easy going man who never worked his men hard and consequently Sancho had visions of a welcome loaf until his master should get back from his hunt.

"Good. Then see that you tell the other boys and Coyote when he comes in. If you think the cuss is likely to stir up trouble, just tip John off."

"Uhuh. Say, Fred, that Coyote ain't no good, no-how. If you're going to keep him, the rest of us is going to chuck the job."

An instant, an angry flash shone in Bloomer's eyes as he heard these words. But quickly realizing that any open dispute with his men under the present circumstances would only delay the witch-hunt, he curbed his wrath, contenting himself with saying:

"We'll talk that over when I get back, Sancho. Now, remember if you fellows try to cut up any monkey-shines, I'll fire the whole kit and boodle of you—and keep the pay due you besides!"

This threat, coming as it did near the end of the season, when the cowpunchers had a quarter's wages almost due, had more effect toward keeping them docile than anything else could and, as though he already saw the money escaping from him, Sancho promised that he would take care of the other cowboys and keep them within bounds.

Having attended to this very important matter, the owner of the Three Bar returned to his fellow ranchers and after giving a few parting instructions to his wife and a general leave taking, the band of witch-hunters made their way to the corral, quickly saddled their ponies and cantered away to the South for the purpose of securing the services of Blue Sky.

But while they rode in that direction, another horseman was burning the ground under his feet as he dashed up the trail which led to the Joaquin valley and

over which Sanders and his family had travelled the night before!

Could Bloomer or the owner of the Square and Cross ranch have come upon this man riding so desperately, they would have recognized him as Coyote and had they known his destination, they would have been filled with consternation!

The skulking form which none of the ranchmen had seen hiding behind the corral fence when they held their all-important council to decide upon their method of procedure to locate old Shebear was that of the cowboy who had failed to respond to his master's summons.

Having realized that something extraordinary must be afoot when the owners of so many ranches gathered at the Three Bar, Coyote had determined to find out what it was and accordingly he had followed them when they went to the horse yard, dropping down to the ground when he had found a place where he could hear all that was said without being seen.

But as the plan to put an end to the old witch was unfolded and the means by which they intended to learn her whereabouts was disclosed the traitorous cowboy almost gave his presence away, so amazed was he. Yet he controlled himself and drank in eagerly all that was said.

In fear and trembling lest he be discovered when the ranchmen left the corral, he scarcely breathed. But as soon as they had proceeded some twenty feet, he began to glide with the silence and swiftness of a snake for the farther corner of the horse yard that he might get to his feet and return to the bunkhouse before he should be called. For as Bloomer had said, he revered and feared the old witch and he considered it his duty to apprise her of the impending danger—if such a thing were possible.

Unaccustomed to thinking quickly, or, for that matter, to thinking at all, the halfbreed was at the door of the bunkhouse before it occurred to him that the surest way to get the news of the search for her to Shebear was to leave the ranch immediately and trust to luck that his absence would not be discovered.

How well he succeeded the reader already knows.

Exactly where he would find the witch, the traitorous cowpuncher did not know. But, having had dealings with her before, he was aware that she usually inhabited a cave which led off from the trail to the Indian burying ground, just about a rod from the plateau.

Reasoning that because of the flood, Shebear would not venture to leave the cave, he, therefore, decided to seek her in that spot first.

With a haste born of mingled fear of pursuit and desire to win the favor of the old witch by informing her of the plot against her life, Coyote rode with quirt and spur and, in a surprisingly short time, was mounting the trail to the burying ground.

Proceeding with great care as he approached the plateau, when he had reached the spot where he believed the path branched off to the cave, he gave two low hoots, like an owl.

Instantly there came an answering hoot and in a few minutes a voice demanded from the darkness, in the language of the Navajo Indians:

"Who is it?"

Being able to talk the dialect, the traitorous cowboy answered:

"Coyote."

"What brings you here?" demanded the voice, in which there was a tinge of suspicion.

"News of importance to you!"

"Tell me."

"Not here. I'm tired. I've ridden far and I want to rest."

A moment the questioner considered the request, then, evidently fearing treachery, replied:

"How can I know you are telling me the truth? Give me some proof."

"Sanders and eight ranchers are on your trail!" returned the halfbreed. And the gasp of surprise and dismay that greeted the announcement repaid the traitor for all his trouble.

"Coyote is a good animal. Come quickly to the cave. I will lead the pony," returned the voice.

Rapidly the old witch, for she it was, guided the horse to her hiding place, drew aside a curtain of buffalo skin and disclosed a room, cut from the solid rock, filled with all sorts of hideous drawings, tripods, kettles and a conglomeration of odors that were almost stifling.

"Now speak—and be quick. Forget nothing," commanded Shebear, her fury at the thought that she should be hunted evident in her eyes.

Slipping from his saddle and throwing himself on a pile of skins, the halfbreed rolled and lighted a cigarette with a deliberateness that was maddening to his companion.

"Speak—or get out!" snapped Shebear, reaching significantly for a ladle that projected above the edge of one of the caldrons.

Fearing that the old witch would cast one of her spells over him, Coyote obeyed.

Not a single word of what he had overheard did he omit.

When he had finished, Shebear chuckled silently, her wizened features made more hideous by her diabolical grin.

"So the palefaces think to hunt me, me, Shebear?" she exclaimed. "I'll show them—and all others—that Shebear is above being harmed. Last night, I sent three messages of the braided hair and arrows to Sanders. To-night and to-morrow night, I will send messages to Billings, Andrews, Moulton, Henry, Hunt, Henderson, Howe, Judson and Bloomer!" And the old hag cackled exultingly, resuming her questions after a few minutes' gloating.

"You say the palefaces have gone to get Blue Sky to lead them to me?"

"Yes."

"Then if you would still further win my favor, Coyote, do you ride to-night and carry this message to fix on Blue Sky's door."

"But Bloomer and the other ranchers may meet me," protested the halfbreed to whom the thought of going forth into the night again, especially on an errand fraught with such danger as delivering a message to the very house whither the witch-hunters were bound, was anything but welcome.

"There is no danger," returned the old hag. "Shebear will protect you!"

Such certainty did the witch put into this statement that Coyote almost believed her and, understanding that his life would pay for his refusal, he consented to bear the message.

"You won't regret it," commented Shebear, going

to a rock and taking up three arrowheads which she quickly bound together in a fan shape.

As she faced about, holding the symbol aloft, the traitorous cowboy shuddered.

"You understand the message?" she chuckled.

"Yes."

"Then deliver it—and come back here. I shall need you again."

And seizing the pony by the bridle, Shebear led it from the cave and out to the trail.

"Is it safe to ride down the valley?" asked Coyote, as he swung none too eagerly into the saddle.

"Yes, the flood has gone down. Ride the trail next the rocks, there are few bodies of the cattle in it, the water sucked them toward the river."

And as though fearing her messenger might repent of his promise, the old hag struck his pony a sharp blow on the flank, causing it to leap forward with a suddenness that required all the cowpuncher's skill to maintain his seat.

The distance from the burying ground to the log hut where Blue Sky lived was not more than eight miles, whereas the route travelled by the witch-hunters was more than twenty-five, due to the fact that the trail they must follow circled the base of the foothills.

Accordingly, Shebear's messenger, by riding hard, was able to arrive before the ranchmen, as he found by dismounting and creeping on his hands and knees when he had approached to within a hundred yards of the hut.

Thanking his good fortune, the traitorous cowboy stuck the three arrowheads in the jamb of the door, hurriedly made his way back to his pony and was well on his road back to the cave when the witch-hunters drew rein in front of Blue Sky's cabin.

Roused by the pounding of hoofbeats, the guide opened a shutter of his window and demanded to know who the horsemen were.

Being told, he quickly lighted a torch and opened the door.

As he did so, the dire message, in the form of the fanlike arrowheads, fell at his feet.

Attracted by the rattle of the stone on the floor, Blue Sky looked down—and, as his eyes fell on the symbol, he leaped back in terror.

"What is it?" demanded several of the horsemen, realizing from the guide's actions that something unusual must have occurred to scare him so.

"Go way! Go way!" shouted Blue Sky, instead of answering, and seized the door with the evident intention of slamming it closed.

Ere he could do so, however, Sanders leaped his horse forward, so that its shoulder prevented the door from shutting.

"See here, you old devil, none of this funny business!" he snapped. "Tell us what has scared you so?"

But the guide made no response, instead shaking like a leaf at the mention of the symbol.

Sensing trouble, the other ranchmen crowded their ponies close to the door while Hunt whipped out his six shooters and, pointing them at Blue Sky, shouted:

"Cut that out! Tell us what those arrows mean. If you don't, I'll blow your head off!"

"You go way, me do?" demanded the guide, seeking relief in compliance with the request.

"Sure!" returned the owner of the Bow and Arrow, adding under his breath, "when we get ready."

"Him arrow mean Blue Sky take trail, Shebear kill um!"

As they heard the interpretation of the symbol, the witch-hunters gazed at one another in amazement.

"Do you suppose the old hag knows we're on her track?" exclaimed Henderson.

"Evidently," retorted Sanders. "There's been treachery somewhere! You fellows couldn't have been quite so secret about your destination as you thought," he added, facing the rest of the posse.

"If there's been treachery, it's that ornery Coyote whom Fred couldn't find when he wanted him!" asserted Judson. "If I'd known he was on the Three Bar, I'd have had him tied up the minute we got there!"

"To know we were coming for Blue Sky the cuss must have heard all we said while we were in the corral," declared Bloomer.

"That's what!" chimed in several of the others.

"Then we have got our work cut out for us!" declared Howe—and his companions readily agreed with him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WITCH GATHERS HER FORCES.

The attention of the witch-hunters was momentarily distracted from consideration of the treachery of Coyote, however, by old Blue Sky.

"You say you go, we tell 'bout arrows," he whined. "Me told why you no go?"

Signalling to the others that he had formulated a plan adequate to meet the situation, Sanders replied:

"We are going, Blue Sky—we're going hunting for grizzly bear. The flood must have driven a lot of them out and we want to get at them before they have a chance to get over onto the Three Bar and the other ranches beyond the foothills. That's—"

"But Shebear, you no after her?" interrupted the old guide, scanning the faces of the ranchmen before him intently.

"What should we be after her for?" returned the owner of the Broken Circle, parrying an answer to the halfbreed's question by asking one himself.

And as Blue Sky could think of no reason why any white man should so toy with fate as to take up the trail of the old Navajo witch, he kept silent, while Sanders continued: "Somebody's been playing a joke on you, Blue Sky—or else to satisfy some grudge you have against Shebear you've been plotting against her and she's found you out."

As the other ranchman heard these words, they realized that the owner had hit upon a shrewd method of quieting the suspicions of the halfbreed guide and, in the fear that they might say something that would give the situation away, they wisely kept silent, leaving all the talking to their grizzled spokesman.

At the accusation that he had been conspiring against the old witch Blue Sky shuddered.

"Aha! I've struck it, have I?" exclaimed Sanders. "You're a pretty clever old cuss—but no Injun was ever as clever as a white man, Blue Sky!"

Though his companion ranchers heard this statement with amusement, they nevertheless realized the point that their leader was making and refrained from mak-

ing any comment. And seeing that his words had produced a marked effect upon the halfbreed, Sanders proceeded to press his advantage.

"You see, we're onto you, Blue Sky," he continued. "You don't dare deny you have been plotting against Shebear, do you?"

But the old guide refused to make any response.

"All right, if you don't want to admit it," chuckled the owner of the Broken Circle. "I can't say that I blame you for not wanting to acknowledge the fact. But there's one thing you might just as well get into your head now as any other time—you can't shift the blame for your own actions onto us! We won't stand for it!"

Though the halfbreed would sooner have thought of plotting against his Satanic majesty himself than against the old Navajo witch, Sanders had literally "got the jump" on him and his brain was too paralyzed to think.

Noting this fact, the owner of the Broken Circle said, impressively:

"What the merits of your trouble with Shebear are, of course, none of us know. But we're your friends, Blue Sky. As I told you, we've come over here to hunt grizzlies. Now—"

"Why you got all um palefaces from tother side of foothill, then?" interrupted the old guide, suddenly finding his tongue.

"My ranch house was carried away by the flood and I took my family over to the Three Bar," innocently returned Sanders. "When the other boys heard of the break, they came round and suggested a grizzly hunt. That's all there is to it."

"But as I was saying when you broke in, seeing that you have brought down the wrath of Shebear on your head, the best thing for you to do is to come with us and serve as our guide while we hunt. Then when the old hag comes to make good her words of death to you, she'll find that you're not at home."

"Which way you go for grizzly?" demanded Blue Sky, after a few moments' deliberation.

"That's up to you. But my opinion would be that we go South," returned the owner of the Broken Circle, innocently.

As their fellow spoke these words, the other ranchmen realized that he had conceived the idea of throwing the Navajo witch off her guard by actually indulging in a grizzly hunt, as the various members of the party had told their families and cowboys, thereby bringing discredit upon the traitorous Coyote and at the same time giving themselves a chance to change their plan of campaign.

In consequence, all of them waited with bated breath the reply of the old halfbreed.

And as the minutes passed without any response from him, their anxiety increased.

Though they did not know it, Sanders' remark that no Indian was a match in cleverness for a white man came near being their undoing!

As Blue Sky's torpid brain began to work, he realized that he had had no trouble with Shebear and for that reason she could have no occasion for sending him the three arrow message. But fortunately for the ranchmen, his reasoning powers did not carry him far enough to suggest that the old witch might have received word of the white men taking up her trail. Consequently, the guileless assertion that the ranch owners desired to go South—in the exactly opposite

direction from that of Shebear's cave—caused the old guide to believe that, after all, they were merely out to hunt grizzlies, as they said.

"Me go!" he exclaimed, after what had seemed to the horsemen an age.

"That's the talk!" ejaculated Bloomer, unable longer to control his suspense. "We'll give you a hundred dollars, Blue Sky, for the trip!"

"And I'll add a hundred if I get the biggest bear," declared the owner of the Broken Circle, with a significance that was only understood by his companions.

The visions of so much money—for he knew that the ranchmen were all rich—lent speed to the guide's feet and, turning away from the door, he hastily grabbed up his rifle, together with plenty of shells, and quickly passed from the door, locking it with a padlock.

"Me get pony, then be ready," he exclaimed, starting off in the direction in which he kept his pinto.

"Better go with him," whispered the owner of the Three Moons to Howe who was on the outside of the group. "The old cuss seems straight but you can't tell what scheme an Injun has in his head."

This suggestion being common sense, the ranchman obeyed and, urging his pony forward, he was soon at the side of Blue Sky, his hand on his pistol butt, ready to draw it, should the halfbreed make any suspicious move.

But the guide had been outwitted and, after throwing a blanket over his pinto's back and adjusting the noose of rawhide with which he controlled the animal, rode back with the owner of the Half Moon and was soon leading the troupe down the valley, between Judson and Moulton.

Purposely keeping to the rear and signalling Bloomer to hold back, also, Sanders exclaimed:

"That was a mighty close call, Fred. According to my ideas, the best thing to do is to forget all about Shebear for the next twenty-four hours and actually hunt grizzlies. There's no doubt but that someone has put the old witch wise to our plans. Maybe it's Coyote, as Judson says, and maybe it isn't. Anyhow, the ornery hag will be looking for us right away and when she finds we don't show up, she'll think somebody has been fooling her and then we'll have our chance."

This argument seemed irrefutable to the owner of the Three Bar ranch and he readily consented to the course of action suggested. Accordingly word was passed among the ranchmen of the change in the plans and, for the moment, they entered into the spirit of the hunt for the dread grizzlies with a will.

But they were to learn that the old Navajo witch was more shrewd than they thought her!

No sooner had she despatched the traitorous cowboy on his mission of warning to Blue Sky than she scurried up the trail to the burying ground and mounted a fleet-footed pony which she kept there, setting his head in the direction of an Indian settlement some twenty miles to the West of the Joaquin river where she knew she would find a colony of drink-crazed bucks and several greasers whom she would have little difficulty in pressing into service to take up the trail of the ranchmen.

What Coyote would think when he returned and discovered her absence she did not care, being mindful of the fact that she had told him she would carry her

curse and the braids and arrows to the homes of the men who had joined in the hunt for her.

Moreover this was actually the cause to which the traitorous cowboy attributed her departure when he found she was not in the cave—and as a matter of fact, he was not sorry to find her gone.

Steadily the old hag rode toward the Indian encampment and at daybreak her eyes beheld the welcome sight of the tips of their teepees reaching into the air.

Making her arrival known by three shrill hoots, Shebear was soon surrounded by a jabbering crowd of redskins and greasers.

Immediately, she told them of the band of ranchmen who had taken the trail to hunt her to her death.

With mingled emotions, her words were heard. Some of the bucks, in their hearts, hoped that she might be made to suffer the death she richly merited, yet appeared to resent such a defiance—their desire to see her put out of the way being due to their fear of her because of certain deeds of theirs of which she was cognizant—while others were really sincere in their indignation.

"What do you wish us to do, Shebear?" demanded Running Horse, the leader of the encampment, in his native tongue.

"How many braves have you here?" the witch demanded, intending to formulate her plans according to the strength she could muster.

"Thirty and seven greasers," returned the village chieftain.

"Ten I will take back with me to the cave. The rest of you will ride to the hut of Blue Sky and pick up the trail of the palefaces from there," exclaimed Shebear. "Make haste, now! The quicker Shebear strikes down the fools who hunt her, the greater will be the respect for her among the palefaces!"

Whooping and dancing with glee, for the redmen were overjoyed at the prospect of participating in a raid that was not only sanctioned but ordered by the old witch, which to their minds insured immunity from danger, the bucks and greasers hastened to their wigwams to get their rifles and scalping knives, shouting to their squaws to blanket and bring up their ponies.

And in less than fifteen minutes after Shebear had arrived at the encampment, thirty Indians and seven halfbreed Mexican desperadoes were in their saddles, all eager to kill the white men, who had dared take the trail against the old witch, and to spread fear and fire among their ranch houses.

Gazing at the evil, crafty faces before her, Shebear emitted her bloodcurdling cackle.

"Special favor to the brave who brings the scalp of Sanders, Evans and his wife to me!" she cried.

And, after picking out the ten bucks she wished to take back to the cave with her, the hideous old witch sent the others on their murderous mission.

CHAPTER XII.

THE AMBUSCADE.

Among the braves whom Shebear sent to follow the ranchmen and track them till they could kill them were

all seven of the greasers and the most reckless and bloodthirsty of the Indians.

Purposely had she chosen the halfbreed Mexicans for the reason that they always were supplied with the contraband "fire water" and she knew full well that they would share the liquor with the bucks, thereby working the latter up to a pitch of excitement that would lead them to tackle any number of white men and commit all sorts of atrocities upon their bodies should they succeed in overpowering them—as she hoped they might, for the mutilation would add immeasurably to her prestige and the fear which she inspired in red and white man alike.

But in choosing the braves who were to go back to the cave with her she had exercised the greatest care. Her use for them consisted in delivering the braid and arrow warnings and in guarding her cave against attack, should the ranchmen be successful in either eluding or overcoming the detachment of bucks sent on their trail.

To perform these tasks, cunning, fleetness of foot and consummate skill in stalking were required, accomplishments that all the members of the Indian village did not possess.

The old witch, however, was well aware of those who measured up to her needs and, though her selection had apparently been made quickly and without ulterior motive, she had, nevertheless, reserved the cream of the braves for her own messengers and body guard.

Surrounded by her escort, Shebear waited until the other band had disappeared and then gave the word to start.

For a while, they rode rapidly and without regard to the noise they made. But as they approached the valley, they grew cautious, fearing lest they might run across some scouting party from Swanville searching the path of the flood for human bodies.

Accordingly, when they reached the crest of the hills opposite her cave, the old witch ordered a halt, sending three of her bucks down into the river bottoms to reconnoitre.

Silently they departed only to return some hour later with the information that the only objects visible were the carcasses of the dead cattle and the vultures and wolves feeding off them.

But instead of being reassured by these reports, the old hag was deeply worried.

"You did not do well," she told them in the Navajo tongue. "Sanders and his white brothers are somewhere in the neighborhood, probably hiding until darkness comes that they may attack the cave. You should have found out where they are. If we venture to go down into the valley now, they will likely see us—and though I know the Navajo braves are worth any two of their white brothers, man to man, I do not care to risk having any of you struck by a bullet and sent to the Happy Hunting Ground till you have carried my curse and the symbols of the Black Death to the foolish men who have set out on my trail."

This speech made a deep impression upon the bucks, conveying as it did only the suggestion that it was consideration for her escort that prevented her from ordering an immediate advance.

But had the old hag spoken the truth, she would have said that it was fear that one of the bullets might send her to the death she so richly deserved that alone deterred her. For there was no place in the world

where she felt so safe as in her cave with all the paraphernalia of her craft at hand with which she had always been able to strike terror to the hearts of any who chanced to discover her place of abode.

But with the memory of the traitorous cowboy's warning in her mind, she did not dare to cross the valley in daylight and accordingly the little band concealed themselves in the fringe of bushes along the top of the foothills whence they could command a clear view of the bottom lands in both directions.

The band with Running Horse however, were not deterred by any such fear!

As the old witch had anticipated, the bucks were scarcely out of sight from the teepee village than one of the greasers produced a flask from his saddle bag and passed it round, the others handing out another and another as each was emptied with the result, as might have been expected, that the redmen were howling drunk before they had even begun their mission of death.

Alone of them all Running Horse abstained from over-indulgence in the liquor for he realized that Shebear would hold him responsible for the success of the raid and he simply did not dare to yield to his inclinations.

Several times he tried to make his braves desist from drinking but in vain.

Knowing full well that unless he sobered them up before they struck the hut of Blue Sky, the ranchmen, should they be there, would hear them and be prepared to receive them with greetings of lead, the chieftain pondered long over the manner in which he could accomplish the task without rousing the hostility of any of the bucks.

But no plan suggested itself to him and he was on the point of ordering a halt till the effect of the alcohol should have worn away when one of the redmen leaped his pony into a mad run down the trail from the foothills yelling a challenge to his fellows to race him.

On the instant Running Horse viewed the suggestion with alarm then, when he saw the shaking his braves were receiving as one after another they set out in full cry in pursuit of the leader, he grinned with satisfaction.

"Fool Injun either shake um sober or get killed," he chuckled. But that he might be on hand to resume command when they reached the bottom lands, he gave chase, yet at a more leisurely gait.

Never was there a wilder ride than that of these Navajo bucks down the trail of the foothills enclosing the Joaquin valley!

Whooping and yelling, they waved their arms, reeling from side to side, many a time only missing being crashed against some jutting rock by the fraction of an inch. But their ponies were sure footed little animals and, thanks to this fact, not a single mishap occurred to any of them, the entire band of twenty-seven arriving in the bottom lands sound of body and limb, the fumes of the liquor driven from their brains.

Yet though they had been cured of their drunkenness, the Indians were in no pleasant frame of mind and loudly they called upon the greasers to provide them with more whiskey.

But the halfbreed Mexicans had exhausted their supply and the bucks were forced to go without—a fact which did not tend to restore them to their good humor.

"Injun only meet paleface now, eat um up!" grinned Running Horse, as he joined his braves and noted their condition.

Yet though they approached to within a hundred yards or so of the old guide's hut and then stalked it with all the cunning of which they were master, they found that their foes had departed, as the reader already knows.

"Going to follow them or wait here?" demanded one of the halfbreed Mexicans as they rode up to the little cabin after making sure that no one was about.

Before answering, however, Running Horse slid from his pony and examined the tracks left by the ranchmen as they galloped away toward the South on the bear-hunt which they had not intended to take.

"H'm, ten pony. Make nine paleface and Blue Sky," he grunted. "Blue Sky no love paleface. Me know. Kill um papoose and squaw. Him got t'ree arrow from Shebear, know paleface hunt um Injun. Mebbe go Sout' only fool paleface. Come dark, Blue Sky come back. Make wait in teepee, him carry word to Shebear. We stay here, hide round hut."

After making this announcement, the chieftain waited to learn whether or not any of his braves had any opposition or suggestion to offer and, finding that they had none, he quickly gave the order for them to conceal their ponies in the adjacent underbrush, far enough away, however, that they would not smell the horses of the ranchmen and whinny, thereby giving warning of the ambushade, while they themselves were instructed to select positions close upon the trail, part on either side, that they might rake the riders from right and left.

When these commands had been carried out, Running Horse announced that he, himself, would stand watch for the return of the ranchmen and his bucks quickly curled up and went to sleep.

All unconscious of the danger that threatened them, the witch-hunters had galloped some ten miles from the hut of their guide when Judson suggested that they halt and have breakfast.

The proposal meeting with ready response, the ranchmen quickly slid from their saddles, and, after making their horses fast, produced food and cooking utensils from their saddlebags and set about preparing the meal.

While some of them were attending to these matters, Howe, Billings and Andrews called Sanders and Bloomer one side for a consultation.

Intently they listened while the owner of the Broken Circle announced the plan of procedure upon which he and Bloomer had agreed. But it did not meet with their approval.

"What's the use of riding all over here and gone, and tiring out our ponies?" demanded the owner of the Tripod ranch. "Not only do we run the risk of having some of us injured by a grizzly but by staying away for twenty-four hours, we give old Shebear just the opportunity she may be looking for to hit the trail for some part of the country where it will be more healthy for her. I'm for 'bout facing and getting back at least as far's Blue Sky's shanty."

For several minutes they and the other ranchers, who had joined them, discussed the proposition from all angles but without coming to any agreement.

"The only way to settle the matter is to put it to a vote," finally declared Jim Henry.

"Go ahead, I'm willing," returned Sanders.

And accordingly a vote was taken, resulting in six favoring an immediate return and three advocating a delay of at least twenty-four hours.

But Sanders, Bloomer and Judson, who had opposed the change in plans, did not attempt to dissuade their fellows further, only insisting that the day be spent where they were and the return postponed till dusk.

This sudden change in their plans was not welcome to the halfbreed, however.

"How I get money, you-all no hunt?" he demanded, angrily. "You-all say Blue Sky go with you give um hundred, two hundred dollars for grizzly. Now say no want shoot. By gar! You think fool um Blue Sky! You-all want hunt Shebear not grizzly!"

And as this idea suddenly flashed into his mind, the old guide glanced from one to another, watching the expressions on their faces keenly.

Regretting that the issue had been forced upon them instead of being left to an occasion of their own making, the ranchmen all looked toward the owner of the Broken Circle, their glances indicating that they wished him to deal with the situation as he thought best.

Correctly interpreting their meaning, Sanders faced the halfbreed that he might watch every movement of his limbs or face.

"Well, suppose we *had* rather hunt Shebear, what of it?" he demanded.

But if the ranchmen had expected the old guide to show any surprise or indignation at finding that he had been tricked into leaving his hut on the pretext of shooting grizzlies, they were disappointed, for a narrowing of his eyelids was the only visible effect the words produced.

"Paleface hunt Shebear, paleface hunt without Blue Sky!" he finally replied.

"What makes you say that?" asked Judson. "If we give you, say the two hundred dollars we promised you for getting a shot at some grizzlies, why won't you take us to her cave?"

"Blue Sky no have trouble with Shebear, no matter what Sanders say—no want have any."

"But I should think you would call that arrow message the old hag sent you the forerunner of trouble," retorted Andrews.

"Shebear not angry at Blue Sky, only not want him get killed 'long with palefaces," returned the halfbreed, with a quiet conviction that was disconcerting to the ranchmen, to say the least.

"Huh, that's all rot," exclaimed Judson. "I'll bet you are afraid of her. That's why you won't tell us where her hole in the ground is."

But the contemptuous allusion to his lack of courage did not rile the old guide.

"Mebbe so, mebbe not," he responded, with provoking deliberation. "All is, Blue Sky no hunt Shebear!"

There was a finality about the words that caused the witch-hunters to realize that no amount of persuasion would tempt the halfbreed to guide them to the lair of the old hag and they decided to resort to more drastic measures.

Like a flash, the owner of the Broken Circle ranch whipped out his sixshooter and covered Blue Sky.

"Now, what do you think about leading us to Shebear? Either you'll do it, or I'll give you a send-off for that Happy Hunting Grounds that wall carry you clear across to the farther side of them!" he snapped.

Sanders' drawing of his gun had been too quick for

the halfbreed and with his own hand part way to his pistol butt, which protruded from his belt, he glared wickedly at the man who held him at his mercy.

"Well, which is it to be?" demanded the ranchman, impatiently. "We can't fool round here with you all day."

But even in his dire extremity, the guide showed the stoicism of his race!

"You give Blue Sky two hundred dollar he take you Shebear cave?" he asked, literally bargaining with death, which, in the form of the ranchman's sixshooter, stared him in the face.

"Not a sou! Nothing but your good-for-nothing life!" returned Sanders. "And you've got to make up your mind mighty quick whether you think it is a fair price," he added significantly.

"Palefaces think get to cave, Shebear no kill with Black Death?"

"That old hag couldn't so much as kill a flea with her Black Death!" retorted the owner of the Broken Circle.

"Paleface save um Blue Sky no kill Shebear?"

"Sure thing. If you're afraid to stay in this part of the country in case the old hag gets away from us, we'll send you anywhere you want to go, eh, boys?" and Sanders looked toward his companions for confirmation of his promise.

"That's what we'll do, Blue Sky," exclaimed several.

"Then me go."

Not placing any too great reliance upon the halfbreed's promise, however, Sanders, Bloomer and Judson kept close to him until it was time to bring up their ponies and even after they were mounted and retracing their steps, for they were aware that his consent to guide them to the witch had not been given willingly and they feared some trick.

And when the opportunity came to turn the tables on his captors, Blue Sky did not hesitate to make the most of it!

As the witch-hunters neared the spot where Running Horse and his braves were lying in ambush, the keen scent of the old guide told him that there were Indians close at hand.

Confident that he could prove he had been forced to act as guide for the ranchmen the halfbreed saw his chance for squaring matters in regard to the treatment he had received and made no mention of his discovery.

In consequence of this treachery, the witch-hunters approached the shanty without thought of danger.

But their lightheartedness was not long lived.

Waiting until he was sure there were no more than ten men in the party, including Blue Sky, Running Horse gave the word to fire.

Crack! went the rifles held by the bucks.

But fortunately for the ranchmen, their hands were still shaking from the liquor they had drunk and not a bullet found a human target!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WITCH-HUNTERS LOSE THEIR PONIES.

Taken completely off their guard, it was several moments before the ranchmen recovered from their surprise.

"An ambush! An ambush!" yelled Bloomer.

"Aim at every puff of smoke you see! The devils are drunk—so we've nothing to fear from their shooting!" bellowed Sanders.

And his words seemed true, for though they had many close calls, not a bullet struck one of the witch-hunters.

The aim of the ranchmen, however, though they were forced to fire at random, potting blindly at any puff of smoke, was more effective, as an occasional piercing howl told that a leaden messenger from one of their rifles had found lodgement in some redskin.

But it did not take long for the owners of the Broken Circle and Three Bar ranches to realize that the shooting was nothing more than a waste of shells, obliged as they were to wait until they saw the flash of a rifle before they fired and then not knowing whether the man they were aiming at was above or below the mark.

"They'll milk us of all our bullets, if we keep on this way, Joe," breathed Bloomer. "Stop 'em!"

No sooner did this appeal reach his ears, than the grizzled ranchman rose in his stirrups.

"Don't fire another shot!" he roared. "Swing back and forth in your saddles so the cusses can't get a line on you and ride for all you are worth, straight ahead! The bucks are on foot, or they'd have been out upon us before this!"

Realizing that Sanders' advice was sound sense, the other ranchmen instantly ceased firing and, burying the rowels of their spurs in their ponies' flanks, leaped forward along the trail.

But the Indians, chagrined at their failure to bring down any of the men at whom they were pumping lead as fast as they could work the levers of their rifles, were determined not to let them escape so easily and, whooping and yelling, they bounded from their hiding places into the trail, dropping to one knee as they gained the open, that they might take the steadier aim.

Noting the move, Andrews called to his companions.

"Give them two volleys, men," he shouted. "They're kneeling down in the trail. Ready? Now!"

Crash! went the rifles of the ranchmen.

And the howls of pain that rent the air told them their shells had worked havoc among the braves.

"Again!" yelled the owner of the Tripod.

A second time the rifles spoke, bring forth more wails of anguish.

"Let's give them some more!" exclaimed Hunt.

But Sanders and Bloomer were unwilling.

"The thing for us to do is to ride hard and get to some hiding place!" declared the former. "It won't be long before the cusses are on their horses and giving us chase. If we ride now, while we have the chance, we can find some spot, dismount and give

them a dose of their own medicine by ambushing them!"

So sound was this advice that none of the ranchmen deemed it prudent to contradict it and accordingly they turned their attention to rushing their ponies over the trail as fast as they could.

Smiling wickedly at the first crack of the guns which told of the ambushade, Blue Sky had beheld the failure of his half-blood fellows to make their shots effective with alarm. For he realized that instead of being mowed down, the ranchmen stood a good chance of getting off scot free—or at most with only trifling wounds—while the yells and wails of the bucks told all too plainly that the bullets of the white men were finding many a mark.

Once he tried to swerve his pony into the underbrush at the side of the trail and elude the men he had so treacherously led into the ambushade. But the warning whistle of a bullet as it sped from Sanders' rifle close by his head told him that such an attempt was but courting certain death and he forewent any further effort to escape.

Yet bitterly was he to rue his faintheartedness.

Keeping the guide between them, when the leaders of the witch-hunter were safe beyond the range of the red men's bullets, they slackened their pace.

"You would lead us into a death-trap, would you?" hissed the grizzled owner of the Broken Circle, pressing the muzzle of his smoking rifle into the ribs of the halfbreed. "If you hope for mercy at our hands, tell us where we can find Shebear!"

As the other ranchers heard this demand, they listened intently for Blue Sky's reply.

But the guide only grunted.

"Don't try to play with us!" warned Bloomer. "We're in no mood for more of your treachery. Your one hope of being allowed to live is to tell us where the old hag has her cave." And then, an idea flashing into his mind, he added: "You can see from the failure of the bucks even to hit us, while we sent bullet after bullet into them, that Shebear can't protect them—or you!"

This calling attention to the fact that the special emissaries of the Navajo witch, sent out to kill the ranchmen—for that the ambushaders were Indians acting under orders from the old hag none of them doubted—were not rendered invulnerable by the powers of Shebear was a shrewd move on the part of the owner of the Three Bar because it expressed in words the thought that had come into the guide's mind.

Reasoning that if the witch could not protect the men who were carrying out her instructions she could not protect herself, Blue Sky decided to be on the winning side and whined:

"Me tell, you no shoot?"

"We don't make terms with traitors!" retorted

Sanders. "We give you the chance to tell, that's all. If you speak the truth, it may save your life. It depends on what my companions say."

"Give him a chance."

"Let him lead us to the cave and we'll spare his life."

Such were the cries which answered the owner of the Broken Circle's appeal to his fellows.

"You have heard what they say—now decide, quickly!" exclaimed Sanders, giving the halfbreed a poke in the ribs with the muzzle of his rifle by way of hastening his decision.

"Me tell! Me tell!" declared Blue Sky.

"Then do!" thundered Bloomer.

"Shebear cave in rock under Injun burying ground!"

In amazement the ranchmen heard this statement, telling them as it did that daily, or as often as they had traveled the trail up and down the Joaquin valley to and from the ranch house of the Broken Circle, they had passed within easy rifle shot of the old witch.

"Is that the truth?" demanded Sanders, incredulously.

"As Blue Sky hope to live—yes!" retorted the old guide, impressively.

"Hooray! Come on boys, we'll put an end to the old devil to-night!" shouted Sanders, exultingly.

But though the ranchmen rode hard, they did not reach the cave!

And even if they had gained it they would not have found the old witch for she and her picked braves were away, bearing the symbols of the Black Death to the homes of the men who were hunting her!

Unfortunately for the ranchmen, as they advanced toward the hiding place of their quarry, the moon rose full and brilliant.

Cursing its light, the leaders of the witch-hunters drew rein opposite a clump of thick underbrush, some three miles below the burying ground.

"There's no use trying to gain the cave as long as the moon is so bright," declared the owner of the Broken Circle. "Shebear probably has a good-sized guard with her in the cavern and they could pick us off as we approached without our even being able to see where they were hidden."

This statement was so true that none of the ranchmen ventured to question it.

"Then what shall we do?" asked Judson.

"Lie in the cover of these bushes until we have a chance to steal up to the cave when it's dark," returned Bloomer.

"But it may take days," protested Howe.

"Then we'll have to wait," declared Sanders, grimly.

"If any of you fellows want to leave and go back to your ranches, go ahead. I'm going to stay on the old hag's trail until I get her; whether I stay alone or not!"

Whatever their inclinations may have been, the members of the witch-hunting party knew full well that should they desert their fellow when the object of their quest was all but in their power, they would be accused of rank cowardice by the people throughout the region and consequently they signified their intentions of staying with the owner of the Broken Circle until the end.

"All right," exclaimed Sanders, when this decision had been reached. "Now, we'll ride into this underbrush, hobble our ponies on the side next the river and then lie low. Unless I'm mighty mistaken, we ought to have another chance to pick off a few of the bucks who fired at us from ambush."

And though the ranchmen did, indeed, have another run-in with the redmen under Running Horse, it was not in the way they expected!

Taking stock of their losses after the clash near the halfbreed guide's hut, the Indians found that ten of their number were mortally wounded while seven more bore evidence of the marksmanship of the ranchmen in minor flesh injuries.

Detailing three of the latter to care for the bucks it would be useless to take with them, the chieftain bade the others quickly get their ponies and give chase to the men who had wrought such havoc in their ranks.

Of necessity, some time was lost in examining the injuries and the ranchmen had a good lead before the redskins took up the pursuit.

But once they did, they carried it out with the rapidity and cunning for which Indians are famous! Like the men whose trail they were following, when the moon rose, the bucks proceeded with extreme caution.

Ordering all but two of his braves to conceal themselves beside the trail, Running Horse took the bucks he had selected and started on foot to locate the ranchmen.

Finding, by the simple device of wetting his finger and holding it in the air that it felt coolest on the side toward the Three Bar and other ranches, thus indicating that the wind was blowing from that direction, the chieftain made his way to the bank of the river and then worked along it toward the cave of Shebear.

From time to time, he sniffed the air, seeking to discover the scent of horses and men. And as he at last detected their odor, he grinned with glee.

Gazing about him for a likely spot in which they might be hidden, for he was crafty enough to realize that they would probably try to ambush him and his band, the Indian discovered the clump of underbrush in which the ranchmen were hidden.

Bidding his companion braves follow him, Running Horse dropped to his belly and began to worm his way across the stretch of ground that lay between him and his enemies. And though the distance was not

more than five hundred yards, with such infinite care was he obliged to move that it was an hour before he had arrived near enough to see the ranchmen's ponies cropping the sweet grass contentedly.

Up to the moment of his discovery of the animals, it had been the chieftain's intention merely to locate the witch-hunters exactly and then return to his bucks, bringing them up by such a route that he would be able to fall upon the ranchmen suddenly and annihilate them.

But the sight of the ponies put another thought in his mind.

Creeping upon the tired animals with all his cunning, he worked his way round them until he was between them and their owners.

And cautious, indeed, did he need be for a sudden movement might frighten the horses bringing the ranchmen to learn the cause of the disturbance, while at any time one of them might appear to see that all was well with the animals.

But never dreaming that the bucks would attempt such a manœuvre, the witch-hunters were watching the trail running in front of the bushes.

Having at last reached the spot he desired, Running Horse signalled to his two companions that he was ready to act. Leaping to their feet, the three redmen cut the hobbles of the horses with quick, powerful strokes of their scalping knives and then drove them on the run toward the river, waving their arms to scare them into faster flight.

As the sudden pounding of hoofs reached the ears of the ranchmen, they seized their rifles and sprang to their feet, peering down the trail.

But the frightened neigh of one of the ponies told them that the braves were behind and not in front of them.

"Careful, advance in line and give them a volley when I say the word!" whispered Sanders.

Yet when they reached a spot whence they could peer through the bushes, they were dumbfounded to find that their horses were missing.

"After 'em! After 'em!" yelled Andrews.

But Bloomer and Judson countermanded the order.

"Stay under cover!" they shouted. "The bucks are trying to draw us out so they can shoot us down!"

And in consequence of these commands, not a shot was fired after the daring redmen who had stolen the ponies from under the very noses of the ranchmen!

CHAPTER XIV.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

Deeply humiliated, the ranchmen retreated within the shelter of the copse.

"It's a good thing these trees and bushes are rooted to the ground or the redskins would probably

steal them from over our heads!" snorted Henderson in his disgust.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Bob," smiled Bloomer. "You must remember that we're up against a pretty stiff proposition. There's no doubt but that Shebear realizes she's got the fight of her life on her hands and to help her she's probably gathered the cunningest bunch of braves to be found in this region. So there's no great disgrace in having them run off with our ponies, the inconvenience is the more serious."

"Still, it does seem as though nine of us out for the very purpose of hunting the old hag might have been wise enough not to let anybody run off with our mounts," persisted the owner of the Running Dog ranch.

"Oh, well, cry over spilt milk if you want to," returned Bloomer. "If you get any pleasure out of it, all right, only keep your thoughts to yourself. The rest of us don't want to think any more about it than we have to."

These caustic words had the effect of restraining any of the others from commenting upon the loss of the horses and they immediately began to talk about what it was best to do.

"Let's see, we're only about three miles from the burying ground, aren't we?" asked Hunt.

"Just about," returned Sanders.

"Then I don't see that we need ponies. We sure can walk that distance. Indeed, it seems to me that we would run less risk of being seen if we went to the cave on foot than if we rode."

"True enough," commented Judson. "But you miss the point, Tom. What we need mounts for is to give chase to Shebear and her cronies in case they manage to give us the slip, isn't that your idea, Fred?"

"It sure is. There's no doubt in my mind, as some of us said before, that the old hag has another bunch of bucks at the cave with her. Consequently, we're between two fires, with her on the North and the cusses who tried to ambush us on the South. And it isn't hard to see that if the latter got word to Shebear of our whereabouts and that we were without ponies, they could make it all-fired uncomfortable for us."

"Then the thing to do is to keep the two crowds from communicating with one another," exclaimed Moulton.

"If we can," interposed Sanders. "But the first thing to do, as I see it, is to get more horses. The Three Bar being the nearest ranch, that's the place to get 'em. The question is, who'll go? It ought to be some one who knows the trail well."

"You do, don't you?" interrupted Howe.

"Sure, I travelled over it last night, when it was so dark you couldn't see your hand before your face."

"Then why don't you go?" continued the owner of the Half Moon.

"I will, of course, only it being Fred's ranch I didn't know but that he might want to."

"Why not both of you?" suggested Henry.

"Nothing would suit me better," declared Bloomer.

"Come on, Joe. It will take us a good four hours, hiking as fast as we can, to get there and about a third as long to get back, so we'd best be starting."

"Hold on, not so swift, there," interposed Judson.

"It seems to me that one of you ought to stay here, considering how we're between two bands of redskins. The rest of us aren't so used to the cusses as Joe or you, thank goodness our ranches are farther away from them, and we need an older head to direct us, in case we're attacked from both sides at once."

The other ranchmen resented this aspersion on their ability to cope with any situation that might arise, however, and they lost no time in saying so.

"All right, then we'll go," exclaimed Sanders, getting to his feet. "The only advice I've got to offer is that you post a man to keep watch at each point of the compass, to make sure you're not surprised. There are seven of you left which will let you take turns. If you see anything suspicious, shoot at it. By being on your guard, you ought to be able to pick off the bucks—if they ride in to make an attack—before they have the chance to get close enough to make their bullets count. You saw to-night that they can't do much damage at a distance."

This suggestion being readily accepted, the two ranchmen set out on their long tramp while the ones that were left drew lots to see who should take the first turn at sentinel duty and, when the matter was decided, those who had not been chosen rolled up in their blankets, for they had removed their saddles from the ponies before they were stolen, and went to sleep.

Working their way along with a skill that would have done credit to Running Horse, himself, Sanders and Bloomer kept their eyes and ears constantly alert for any sound from in front of them that was in the slightest suspicious—for they believed that Shebear would try to communicate with the band of murderers she had loosed on their trail at Blue Sky's hut.

But their anxiety was needless.

The old witch was busy with other matters!

No sooner had the shadows begun to lengthen in the Joaquin valley than she gave the word for the braves with her to take the trail down from the crest of the foothill where they had rested throughout the day.

Quickly they had gained the bottom lands, crossed them and mounted the path to her cave which they reached in due course, finding Coyote in calm possession and enjoying himself to the full.

Without bothering to introduce the halfbreed to the braves, Shebear busied herself preparing nine

braids of black hair which she tied into as many knots and then thrust an arrowhead through each.

Calling Coyote and eight of the bucks to her, the old hag addressed them:

"To each of you, I give a symbol of the Black Death. These you are to deliver at the ranches of Billings, Andrews, Moulton, Henry, Hunt, Henderson, Howe, Judson and Bloomer. Where they are, you all know. For special reasons, I want Coyote to carry the message of my curse to Bloomer, the rest of you can draw lots to see where you shall go." And as she spoke, the old hag picked up a dish containing eight bear teeth, arranged in a row, then continued: "I have named these in the order of the names I spoke. Leaping Cat, shut your eyes and draw first."

Quickly the brave obeyed, taking the tooth that called for a trip to Moulton's ranch.

In rapid succession, the others secured their allotments.

"You all know how to proceed—rap three times on the door, then stand back and when it is open hurl the sign of the Black Death inside, giving a shrill laugh as you do so. If it pleases any of you, it will not arouse my anger to have you set the torch to the cattle and horse corrals. But of this you must be your own judge. It will depend upon whether or not you are pursued. I do not want any of you to run any risk for I may need you in the cave with me."

And, though the old witch did not know it as she spoke, she was destined to need, not only the nine bucks, but many more!

With breathless interest, the redmen and halfbreed had listened to their instructions and as they were concluded, strode from the cave joyfully, proud of carrying the death messages of the famed and feared Shebear.

That is, all but Coyote. The thought of returning to the ranch of the man he had so basely betrayed filled him with terror. Yet he dared not refuse the mission, and it was with anything but a light heart that he swung into his saddle and took the trail for the Three Bar home ranch.

And his fears were well founded!

Without any untoward incident, he gained the ranch house, delivered the sinister symbol, revelled for one brief moment in the shrieks of terror that the braid and arrow evoked and then dashed away to the trail just as Evans routed out the cowboys and sent them to scour the plains for the deliverer of the startling message.

But the traitorous halfbreed was to pay dearly for his treachery!

Almost at the same time that he raced up the trail from the ranch, Sanders and Bloomer entered it from the valley side.

Of necessity, they advanced more slowly, being on foot. But this handicap proved their good fortune.

Against the rocky trail, their footsteps made scarcely any sound, whereas had they been on horseback, the hoofbeats of their ponies would have prevented their hearing the steps of the animal which Coyote rode.

After an hour or so of walking, the owner of the Three Bar suddenly seized his companion by the arm and halted him.

"There's some one riding over the trail," he whispered.

Instantly, Sanders dropped to his knees and placed his ear against the ground.

"It's from the direction of your ranch," he breathed, after listening a few moments. "Whoever it is, isn't more than a hundred yards away. Let's hide in the bushes here and find out who it is."

"How'll you do it?" demanded Bloomer.

"Hold him up!" returned his companion. "If it's a friend, we can easily explain matters. If it isn't, we'll have the drop on the cuss before he has the chance to defend himself."

Readily acquiescing in the plan, the owner of the Three Bar followed his leader into the bushes where, with sixshooters in each hand, they awaited the arrival of the night traveller.

Never dreaming that danger lurked ahead of him, the cowboy who had betrayed his master drew nearer.

As the head of the pony was abreast of them, Sanders and Bloomer leaped from their hiding place, yelling:

"Halt and hands up!"

Taken utterly by surprise, the halfbreed could do nothing but obey.

"Light a match, Fred, till we see who it is," commanded the owner of the Broken Circle, as he saw the hands of his captive go into the air.

Quickly Bloomer obeyed. As the match flared up, the two ranchmen exclaimed, in unison:

"Coyote!"

Cursing him for his treachery, Bloomer lost no time in snatching the rope from the pommel of the saddle and binding the cowboy tightly about the arms and wrists.

"Make him dismount and then we'll get on his pony and lead him," commanded Sanders. And when the transfer had been made, they resumed their way.

"This sure is luck!" declared the owner of the Three Bar. "Now we can find out all about what Shebear is doing. Coyote, you treacherous devil, if you'll answer my questions, *maybe* I won't shoot you, as you deserve. Will you?"

"If you promise not to shoot me."

"I won't promise, but if you tell all you know and help us, you need have little to fear."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll never see another sunrise!"

Preferring to take the chance of living, the cowboy proved a double traitor by telling the ranchman exactly how to get to the cave, how many bucks the old hag had with her and how many there had been in the band that had followed Running Horse to the hut of Blue Sky.

Eagerly the two witch-hunters drank in this information, finally asking what had brought him out on his night ride. But when they learned, it was all they could do from venting their fury on him then and there.

Indeed, Bloomer even suggested that they send him to his richly merited death but Sanders argued against it, declaring that other points might arise before they could close in on Shebear's stronghold concerning which he might be able to give valuable information and accordingly his master spared his life.

In the light of what they had extracted from the double traitor, the two ranchmen discussed various methods of capturing the old witch.

But of a sudden their attention was drawn in another direction!

As they mounted the crest of the foothill, they were startled to see fires blazing in different places.

"What does that mean, do you know?" thundered Bloomer, giving the rope with which his prisoner was tied a vicious jerk.

"Shebear sent the Black Death to all the men in your party. Said the bucks could burn the corrals—if they wanted to," whimpered Coyote.

Too angry for words, Sanders urged the pony into a run, forcing the traitor to follow them as best he could, now dragging him over the rough ground; now stopping that he might get to his feet.

But so great a handicap did he prove, that Bloomer finally suggested that he dismount and walk with the traitor while Sanders rode with all speed to the ranch, aroused the cowboys and sent them out to endeavor to head off the bucks when they sought to regain the foothills.

In carrying out this plan, however, the owner of the Broken Circle almost lost his life!

As he dashed from the trail out onto the plains, a bullet whistled past his head from the direction of the ranch house.

"Hey! Don't shoot! It's me, Joe Sanders!" he roared at the top of his lungs, repeating his words over and over until he got an answering hail and beheld lanterns bobbing up and down as the inmates of the house and the cowboys rushed out to meet him.

Waiting only to kiss his daughter and granddaughter, Sanders ordered one of the cowboys to ride with horses for Bloomer and his prisoner and then accompanied his family to the ranch house where he quickly told them of all the exciting incidents that had occurred since the band of witch-hunters had set out on their quest.

Ere he had finished, however, one of the boys from the Criss Cross outfit dashed into the yard, bearing the news that the corrals had been fired, the symbol of the Black Death received and saying that Mrs. Billing besought them to give her any information they possessed as to where her husband could be located.

"Write her a note and say not to be afraid, that Ned is camping on the trail, that we'll have old Shebear before nightfall and that I want her to send all the cowboys here she can without delay," commanded Sanders, turning to his daughter. And as she obeyed, the ranchman gave the messenger an idea of what the witch-hunters intended to do.

Before the man from the Criss Cross had gone, other cowboys from the Tripod, Square and Cross, Single Star, Bow and Arrow and Half Moon arrived. To them, the owner of the Broken Circle gave notes similar to the one he had sent to Mrs. Billings.

Ordering them to take fresh ponies from the corral, that they might travel the faster, when all were ready for the home dash, Sanders spoke to them.

"Just as soon as you can, I want you boys and all your outfits that can be spared to ride back here. John Evans will be in command and, under his direction, you are to climb up the foothills directly back of the Injun burying ground and then spread out so that Shebear and the bucks with her won't be able to escape by making a rush down this side of the hills."

Highly wrought up over the prospect of being in at the death of the old witch who had so terrorized the region for years, the cowpunchers promised to return as quickly as ever they could and, digging the rowels of their spurs into their ponies, dashed away, yelling and howling with glee.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CURSE OF THE NAVAJO WITCH PROVES FUTILE.

Soon after the last of the messengers had ridden away, the owner of the Three Bar galloped into the yard and warm, indeed, was his welcome.

In striking contrast was that afforded the traitorous cowboy, however. Walking round him, Sancho and the other members of the Three Bar outfit, called him all the vile names of which they could think and finally wound up by spitting at him.

But before their amusement had gone very far, Bloomer called a halt on his cowpunchers.

"If you don't stop pestering Coyote, I won't let any of you take part in the round up of Shebear," he exclaimed. "I know Coyote isn't much good but he's going to do the best thing he ever did when the sun gets up by leading us to the old witch's cave. So leave him alone. I've no more liking for a traitor than you have, but we can use him to good purposes."

The threat to prohibit them from joining in the attack on the old hag had more effect on the cowpunchers than anything else their master said and, though it was hard for them to do so, they moved away from the double traitor and busied themselves looking to their saddles and guns.

After Sanders had told his friend of the instructions he had sent to all the ranches, Bloomer exclaimed:

"If we only had a few more men to help us on our side, I'd be glad, Joe.—Shebear may only have ten bucks with her, provided the cusses she sent with her Black Death messages all get back. But being up there in her cave, they'll have a tremendous advantage for they'll be able to pick off our men whenever any of us show ourselves and we won't have the chance to get in a shot at them, except, of course, as we shoot at the cave. And if Running Horse brings up his braves and attacks us at the same time, we're liable to have more than we can attend to."

"No doubt about that, Fred. But the trouble is, there aren't any more men we can get. We'll probably have fifty boys from the different ranches but it will take all of that many to patrol the foothills back of the burying ground—and then there won't be enough to do it properly."

"How would it be to wait until nightfall?" asked the owner of the Three Bar.

"Don't dare risk it, Fred. The night may be clear, like last night and it may not. If it isn't we couldn't do a thing for Shebear and her whole precious crew could sneak right by us and we'd never know it. No, we've got to make our attack by daylight, no matter what the odds are against us. But I tell you what we could do. We could arrange it so as to fly some sort of signal, which the boys on the hills along the burying ground could see, in case we are too hard pressed and then they could close in and come to the front of the plateau, which would enable them to pour their shells into any bucks at the bottom."

"But we'd be running the risk of stopping some of their bullets ourselves," returned Bloomer.

"What's the trouble?" asked Evans, who had been attending to getting the ponies ready for the ranchmen to take back with them and had just come into the house in time to hear the owner of the Three Bar's remark.

"We want some more men to help us on our side and we don't know where to get them," replied his father-in-law.

"How about sending for some of the Mounted Scouts?" suggested the younger man.

"Just the thing—if there were any within fifty miles of here, but unfortunately, Fort Hanson is too far away for us to get a messenger there and have the Scouts back in time to be of any assistance. That's—"

"But there are twenty or more up at Swanville," declared Evans.

At the statement, both ranchmen looked up in delighted surprise.

"Are you sure of that? What makes you think so?" demanded his father-in-law.

"One of the boys from Billings' ranch was up there yesterday and he told me."

"Hooray, Joe! That solves our trouble!" cried Bloomer, excitedly. "Here, you Sancho! Get your pony and ride as though your life depended on it to Swanville, find the officer in charge of the Mounted Scouts, tell him what's going on down here and ask him to send as many men as he can spare down the Joaquin valley so they'll reach the trail to the burying ground by ten o'clock, sharp. That'll be plenty early enough, won't it, Joe?"

"I should think so. If we make it any before that, all the boys from the ranches may not be here in time to take up their positions and it won't do to begin the attack until we are all in readiness."

Sancho, however, did not wait to hear more of Sanders' remark than the statement that the hour of ten was the proper one for the Scouts to arrive before he was running for the corral to get his pony and start on his mission.

All during these discussions and giving of orders, Mrs. Bloomer and Harriet had been busy over the stove, preparing a toothsome breakfast and when it was ready, the elder woman exclaimed:

"Now you menfolks just stop talking about that old hag for a few minutes and eat some food. You'll need a good meal and I venture to say you haven't had much since last night before you started."

"That's about right, Mother," smiled the owner of the Three Bar and ravenously he and Sanders ate of the delicious breakfast that was set before them.

More refreshed by the food than anything else they could have taken, when the meal was finished, they resumed the discussion of their plans, devoting their attention to the manner in which Evans could let them know when he and his cowboys were in position.

"How about waving a flag?" suggested Evans.

"Better to fire three shots in quick succession twice," returned his father-in-law.

"But won't that frighten old Shebear?" interposed Bloomer. "It will let her know there's some one behind her."

"Which is just what we want it to," declared Sanders. "She'll realize that she's surrounded and then the rest will be easy!"

Accordingly, it was agreed that when Evans and his cowboys had spread themselves out along the crest of the plateau, effectually cutting off escape in that quarter, he should announce the fact by means of the six rifle shots, fired in series of threes.

All matters having thus been arranged, the two ranchmen bade goodbye to the women, promising to

be back in time for a three o'clock dinner with them, went out to the corral, mounted their ponies and wound the leading ropes for the others round the pommels of their saddles.

"Oh, what time ought I to start to get to the burying ground by ten?" asked Evans, just as they were riding from the yard.

"Start by eight, you can ride hard," declared the owner of the Three Bar.

"Better make it seven, then you'll be sure to have plenty of time," suggested his father-in-law. "It won't do any harm if you are early. Good luck and keep your eyes open. Those bucks are all-fired cunning."

And with this warning, Sanders cantered away toward the trail.

The ride back to rejoin their companions was without incident, though once or twice they were made rather uneasy by seeing Coyote, whom they took with them to serve as guide in case they should need him, turn his head and listen intently. But nothing alarming could they see and in due course they arrived at the copse in which their fellows were hidden.

And welcome, indeed, was the sight of them to the tired and weary men who had passed a sleepless night.

"Any excitement?" asked Sanders as he swung from his pony.

"Nothing but mountain lions and coyotes," returned Judson. "But they kept us busy popping at them. You know you said to shoot at anything suspicious. I don't believe I ever saw so many in my life as there were feeding off the carcasses of the cattle."

"Well, your firing probably kept the bucks off," exclaimed Bloomer. "Anyhow, it let the cusses know that you were awake and on the job, so it did some good and as we brought along a lot of fresh shells, there won't be any danger of our running short."

The sight of the traitorous cowboy evoked such an avalanche of questions from the witch-hunters who had remained on watch that Sanders held up his hands in protest, laughingly telling them he would attend to them one at a time. And accordingly he launched into a detailed account of all that had occurred since he and the owner of the Three Bar left the copse.

When they heard that the bucks had set fire to their corrals, the ranch owners were beside themselves with fury and declared they would start right away for the trail to the burying ground that they might wreak their vengeance on the old hag who had inspired the ruthless destruction.

But Bloomer and Sanders finally prevailed on them to wait until nine-thirty that they might arrive at the same time as the Mounted Scouts.

What had become of the bucks under Running Horse puzzled them, however, the most popular explanation being that they had joined Shebear by some

roundabout trail and were either awaiting the coming of the ranchmen in the cave or in a second ambush.

But they were soon to learn that neither of these opinions was correct.

The witch-hunters had just put their saddles on the horses which the two ranchmen had brought from the Three Bar and returned to the underbrush, when they heard the pounding of hoofbeats, coming from the South.

Springing to their feet, they seized their rifles and crept to the edge of the copse, dropping to their knees that they might have a steadier aim.

Riding like mad, the bucks suddenly appeared around a bend in the trail.

But the instant they beheld the ponies standing all saddled and bridled, they drew rein, held an excited consultation, if their waving arms were any criterion, and then whirled their ponies and disappeared by the same route they had come.

"Well what do you make of that?" demanded Judson, looking from one to another in surprise.

"They evidently think we've been reinforced," exclaimed Henderson. "They knew they drove off our ponies last night and when they see eleven more it's only natural for them to think as many men have come to our assistance."

And, though the ranchmen could not be certain of it, this is exactly what the Indians had thought.

In vain the chieftain had urged them to charge the copse but, led by the greasers, they declared that they preferred to live in the village than to lie dead on the bottom-land—and their argument prevailed.

At nine o'clock Sanders gave the word to mount and, swinging far out into the valley toward the riverbed, that they might avoid falling into another ambushade or making targets of themselves for some of the braves in the cave, they finally drew rein where they could not only command a view up and down the valley but keep a close watch on the lair of the old Navajo witch.

In the meantime, Sancho had found the officer in command of the Mounted Scouts at Swanville, Captain Reid, and after listening to the cowboy's story he had eagerly agreed to take his full command, twenty-five in number—to the rendezvous appointed by the ranchmen, to which Sancho was only too happy to guide them.

At the Three Bar where Evans was awaiting the cowboys, things had not gone so well, however.

Six o'clock had come and half after without the sign of a cowpuncher from any of the other ranches and though there was plenty of time, Evans was nevertheless uneasy for he had expected them to arrive long before, so keen had the messengers been to return.

But the cowboys were having their own troubles on the several ranches.

When they had delivered the notes from Sanders, they had hastened to carry the tidings of the round-up

of the witch to their bunkmates and the cowpunchers had danced with glee in anticipation, only to have their hopes dashed by summonses to the home houses where they were told they would not be allowed to go because of the fear of a second visit from the red-men that the women entertained.

To all sorts of excuses and pleadings did the cowboys resort but without avail until they finally agreed among themselves that two of them would remain on each ranch, their identity to be decided by drawing lots. Though the methods for selecting the lucky members of the party varied at the different ranches, they all depended upon chance, adding still more to the excitement of the men.

Once they were started, however, they made up for as much of the time they had lost as they could by riding their ponies to the very limit and just before the hour appointed to leave the Three Bar ranch, some forty-five of them dashed into the yard.

Quickly welcoming them, Evans explained the part they were to play in the round-up and, bidding his wife and daughter goodbye, vaulted into the saddle and led the way to the trail.

Entirely unconscious of the fact that she was being surrounded, the old witch sat in her cave, wondering what could have become of Coyote and whether or not he had been deceiving her in regard to the hunt for her when Leaping Cat came running in with the information that he had discovered soldiers coming from the North.

Hastening to the edge of her cave, the old hag peered forth and as she looked, another brave came in to report that a small body of men, with two prisoners bound hand and foot to horses, were making their way up the valley by the riverbed.

Little thinking that there was a concert of action between the two bodies of horsemen, Shebear watched the ones by the river, believing that only from them did she have anything to fear.

"Why didn't Running Horse and his braves fall upon them?" she demanded, stamping her foot in anger. "When I have cast my spell upon them, I will go and settle with Running Horse. I will teach him and his pack of cowards that they cannot trifle with Shebear!"

But her wrath against the faithless Indians was quickly forgotten in her amazement at seeing the soldiers suddenly signal to the horsemen by the river and then ride over to them.

In alarm, the braves gazed at one another.

"Had Shebear best not leave the cave while there is time?" suggested Leaping Cat.

"Leaping Cat and his companions need have no fear," returned the old witch, with superb impressiveness. "Shebear will hurl her curse upon the palefaces and they will die!"

But, had the braves not been so engrossed in watch-

ing their foes, they would have noticed that the old hag did not send any maledictions against the ranchmen or soldiers.

After speaking with Sanders and Bloomer, the captain of the Mounted Scouts scanned the hill where the cave was located with his field glasses.

"It will be almost impossible to charge up that trail," he announced at the end of a few minutes. "Three or four men could hold back a hundred, so narrow is it and so convenient are the rocks behind which the bucks can sit and shoot."

"Then what shall we do?" demanded Howe.

"Resort to strategy," returned the officer. "We can hold their attention and draw their fire while your men at the top of the hill crawl over the plateau and shoot them down from above."

"That would be all right if we had any way of getting word to the cowboys—but we haven't," retorted Sanders. "Neither man nor beast can find foothold on those hillsides except at the trail to the burying ground or two miles to the South at the pass to Bloomers' Three Bar ranch."

"Then why not send some of our men down there and let them take word to your cowpunchers," suggested the captain.

"You can send yours, if you want," exclaimed Bloomer. "But any man who tries to cross that trail to-day takes his life in his hands! Why, man, those cowboys are so stirred up that they'd shoot first and ask questions afterward!"

"H'm, then I guess I'll have to send back to Swanville and get a piece of artillery," declared the officer.

But the ranchmen were not in the mood for so long a delay!

"I say, why not rig up some dummy riders and send them up the trail to the cave?" suddenly exclaimed Billings. "That would draw the bucks out and we could get a shot at them."

"The very thing!" chorused the ranchmen.

"Then come on down to the river and we'll fix the dummies up, if we do it up here, Shebear and her braves can see us."

Quickly the witch-hunters swarmed over the bank, stripping off various pieces of clothing as they ran.

To collect branches, grass and leaves with which to stuff the clothes was but the work of a few minutes and calling for ten horses, the ranchmen soon had the dummies securely tied to their backs.

"We'll keep 'em in the center, so the bucks won't see 'em wobble," said Bloomer and willingly the captain ordered his men to form about the lifeless figures.

Halting when they were just within range of the cave, the officer ordered his men to begin firing that their shooting might cover the advance of the ranchmen with the dummy figures.

Purposely making a wide detour that their approach might not be seen by the Indians, Sanders and his

companions rode to the North and then back down the path close to the wall of rock until they reached the trail to the burying ground.

Tying the ponies together in pairs, the ranchmen headed them up the trail and then gave them furious cuts with their quirts which sent the animals bounding up the path, commanding Coyote and Blue Sky to follow on pain of being shot as they sat.

And just as the dummy figures started up the trail, Evans six shots rang out in signal that he was on the plateau.

When word that horsemen were mounting the trail was brought to her, Shebear leaped to her feet and rushed to the mouth of her cave, shrieking and muttering as she waved her hands.

But her imprecations had no effect upon the dummies!

Seized with fear as they saw that the powers of the old hag did not work, the braves dashed from the cave, shooting as they ran, in the mad effort to gain the plateau—only to turn back as they beheld the thin but grim-faced line of cowboys.

Caught between two fires, it was but a few minutes before Shebear's bucks were dead.

Apprised of this by the shouts of the soldiers, the ranchmen dashed up the trail, Sanders and Bloomer at their head.

Dismounting when they reached the path leading to the cave, the two leaders crept forward cautiously while their companions stood with their rifles at a ready to shoot down any one who appeared.

But no living redskin came in sight.

Pausing at the edge of the cave, Sanders looked in.

Crouched against the back of the cave, in awful fury, the old witch hurled the curse of the Black Death at him:

"The Black Death of Shebear be upon you and your children, and your children's children, causing them to die in their boots and to rot in hell! Black Death! Black Death! Strike! Strike now!"

In her blind fury, the old hag fairly screamed the bloodcurdling words.

But Sanders only laughed!

Getting to his feet, just as Bloomer crawled to where he could see inside the cave, the owner of the Broken Circle hissed:

"Shebear, never again will your threats scare innocent women and babes! Would that the people you have terrorized could see how powerless your Black Death is to harm even so much as the hair of my head!"

And as the taunt rang in the ears of the old Navajo witch, there sounded the crash of a gun—and Shebear pitched forward, dead!

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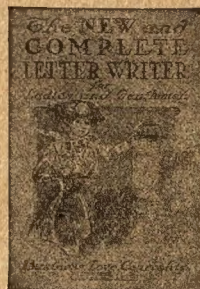
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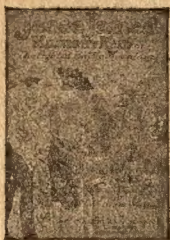
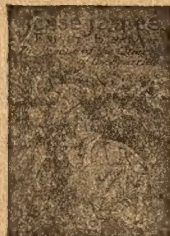
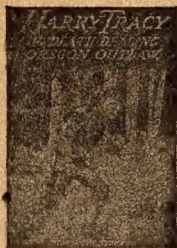


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December	8—No.	2.	TRACKED TO HIS LAIR.....	or The Pursuit of the Midnight Raider
December	15—No.	3.	THE BLACK DEATH.....	or The Curse of the Navajo Witch
December	22—No.	4.	THE SQUAW MAN'S REVENGE.....	or Kidnapped by the Piutes
December	29—No.	5.	TRAPPED BY THE CREES.....	or Tricked by a Renegade Scout
January	5—No.	6.	BETRAYED BY A MOCCASIN.....	or The Round-Up of the Indian Smugglers
January	12—No.	7.	FLYING CLOUD'S LAST STAND.....	or The Battle of Dead Man's Canyon
January	19—No.	8.	A DASH FOR LIFE.....	or Tricked by Timber Wolves
January	26—No.	9.	THE DECOY MESSAGE.....	or The Ruse of the Border Jumpers
February	2—No.	10.	THE MIDNIGHT ALARM.....	or The Raid on the Paymaster's Camp
February	9—No.	11.	THE MASKED RIDERS.....	or The Mystery of Grizzly Gulch
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